

ISAAC AND THE SUN KING

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF  
HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH MAY 2019

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Keywords: Icarus, Apollo, Greek Mythology, Young Adult Literature, Queer YA

## Abstract

This first-person YA novel, complete at 79,500 words, explores intergenerational trauma, queer identity, and various forms of privilege through the use of reinterpreted Greek myths. Titled *Isaac and the Sun King*, this novel is the modern retelling of Icarus and Apollo, the boy who flew too close to the sun, and the god whose chariot placed it in the sky each day. As the son of an eccentric inventor, sixteen-year-old Isaac Hagar (Icarus) is used to watching the impossible come to life, but that doesn't explain why he's plagued with dreams of falling from a mysterious tower prison. When his father takes a job with an airline company belonging to Zach Skylar (Zeus), Isaac meets the man's son, Apollo, a "super-cool" jock with an affinity for archery, medicine, and his "oracle" magic 8-ball. In this tale of reincarnation, where the wrath of the gods takes the shape of small town politics, these two boys must work together to uncover the secrets behind every seemingly-friendly face: who is the mysterious woman haunting Isaac's dreams, and why is she always present before a death; and why, when Isaac looks into the eyes of his neighbors, does he see them living a thousand lives before?

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## Critical Introduction

*Isaac and the Sun King* is a story about adaptation. A modern retelling of the myth of Icarus, the novel would have been impossible to write without the proper research, and initially, that was all it was meant to be: a modern update. But as is always the case in writing, the novel I would eventually write had a mind of its own. Fascinated with the Icarus story, I set out to make my own version, but instead, I wrote a meta-account of adaptation itself, asking the questions: What does it mean to be re-made? Which is the “true” story (if there is one at all)? What is gained in a remake, and what is lost? In this first-person novel, I write from the point of view of Isaac Hagar, a boy who was first born in 166 BC and who has been reincarnated twenty-two times in various bodies and countries of origin. His is, quite literally, a remake of himself.

In his 1979 “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” theorist Fredric Jameson suggests that America’s obsession with remakes has made it so that there is no true original; he also states that pop culture seeks to ask the questions society is afraid to voice and then present impossible, imaginary solutions. This is the Utopia: a happy ending, a fictional solution to a real problem. In adaptations, each new version—and each new ending—tells us something about the current society, presents the modern problems and the modern scapegoats.

So what are the problems presented in the story of Icarus? How do they apply today?

Even in the oldest known version, the tale of Icarus has no happy ending, no solution, no Utopia. Greek antiquity rarely does. The Greek Tragedy—known for its bigger-than-life conflicts and its cosmic irony—provides lessons, perhaps, but not solutions. In *Oedipus*: you will not outrun your fate. *Antigone*: you cannot escape grief. There is catharsis—the living out of the worst of human emotions in the safety of a theatre—but there is no Utopia. If the stories were not made for the theatre, they were still used for demonstration: to explain how aspects of nature

came to be, or how best to live your life. The story of Icarus is usually summarized down to a single lesson: don't fly too high or too low. Over time, the low has been dropped, and what the flight signifies in the real world is dependent on who is telling the story and in which generation and culture it appears.

Greek myths and cautionary tales, like most oral traditions, have no "original author." Homer, most famous for *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* epics, was not one person, but many, and the team effort of creating these works of epic poetry was not to craft new stories, but to preserve stories orally told for generations.

In the story of Icarus, a father and son are trapped in a tower prison; the father crafts wings of feather and wax, and they fly together out the window. "Do not fly too high, or your wings will melt," warns the father. "Do not fly too low, or your wings will get wet." Perhaps the lesson is moderation. But Icarus does not listen to his father. He aims too high, flies too close to the sun, and falls to his death when his wings melt.

What did this story mean to the Greeks? What does it mean to us today?

It was my goal in the act of adaptation to answer these questions, to discover how the past might speak to the present. In a directed reading with Dr. Cristina Bacchilega at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I set out to investigate the many uses of myths in both creative and critical spheres and read Thomas King and Roland Barthes to better understand the cultural understandings of myths, both in the past and present. I then began to compare the ancient, early editions of many ancient mythologies with their modern equivalents. I compared the *Mahabharata* to the 2009 novel, *The Palace of Illusions*; *The Epic Tale of Hiiakaikapoliopole* to *Voices of Fire* by ku'ualooha ho'omanawanui; *The Iliad* to Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. In instances of colonization—which were frequent—adaptation worked as a form of reclaiming;

when the stories of revered Oceanic ancestors, for example, were appropriated by American forces to sell the perfect tourist image of the “Hawaiian maiden” and “paradise,” Hawaiian authors retold the stories to remember their ancestors and the mana of the land and its people. ku’ualoha ho’omanawanui’s book, *Voices of Fire*, was a wonderful example of this power of adaptation; the stories of Pele and Hi‘iaka were used to demonstrate the continued power of Kanaka in Hawai‘i and to re-center Hawaiian literary tradition against the influx of colonial discourse. In other cases, adaptations were used to explore new points of view. Both *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Song of Achilles* reimagined minor characters as first-person narrator.

These last two works were particularly influential to me as I embarked on an entire novel—soon to be an entire series of novels—about Icarus, a boy who never had a single line of dialogue in any of the ancient Greek and Roman myths. In Madeline Miller’s second novel, *Circe*, he is given a handful of pages, but in several thousands of years, this may be the most any author has lent the boy who flew too close to the sun. Icarus, or as he is known in my novel, as Isaac Hagar, may be a recreation, but his personality, his goals, his voice were all up to me.

The inclusion of Apollo in *Isaac and the Sun King (IatSK)*, on the other hand, came from a collection of poetry entitled “Unmytholgize.” The poems in this collection, by author Arlen C., take on the point of view of several Greek entities: Medusa, Persephone, Achilles, and of course, Icarus. In the poem “Icarus’ Guide to Loving Apollo,” Icarus says, “you know this singsong melody of warning bells: your father’s gentle words, the restless-reckless humming beneath your skin. if you want to love a god, learn to ignore it” (C., Arlen iv.). This was the beginning of Isaac’s formation. I initially imagined this “humming” as a sort of rebellion, picturing Icarus as a wild, adventurous youth. But that character refused to come to life on the page.

A “bad boy” Icarus was not the character I needed to write, not the character my younger self would have wanted to read about. I would learn to see this “humming beneath your skin” as Isaac’s anxiety and OCD. I have lived my whole life with both, but I did not read about anyone like me until my third year of college. I wanted this to change; I wanted these traits—so normal in my life, and so abnormal in children’s literature—to be shown on the page. From there, Arlen C.’s poetry helped me to shape one of the novel’s core relationships: his father’s “gentle words” helped me to piece together this father/son bond, one I would see as very loving, but also very controlling. In thinking of Jameson’s theory of Utopia, I began to wonder what was lost when we assumed happy endings; I could not help but think of the many American atrocities that have either been left out of history books or which are mentioned only in a single line. Daedalus, Icarus’ father, was formed, therefore, as a representation of this mentality: he is a man uncomfortable with hard truths who believes that sweeping past traumas under the metaphorical rug can make a better future. But as is the Ancient Greek tradition, the more Daedalus tries to save his son, the more he pushes him away; the more he fights fate, the more he causes his flight and fall.

Day in and day out, during the creating of this book, I would spend my days tutoring young children whose parents wanted the very best for them but who pushed them too far, expected too much. Worst of all, the boys were already falling prey to definitions of masculinity that stifled their true desires: embarrassed of their own kindness, their softness, hesitantly refusing stories of fairies and princesses and adventures, for those of trucks and dinosaurs.

I knew from the start, I wanted to write this myth as a story for teenagers, and my work as a teacher began to shape the Icarus I needed: a kind, loving, gentle boy with too much to carry on his small shoulders, a boy who wanted to do good, but did not know how. The children’s

show “Steven Universe”—a tale of three queer women raising a super-powered, sensitive young boy—and the newest adaptation of Spiderman—*Spiderman: Homecoming*, which brought to life a kind, nervous, young new take on the classic Peter Parker—were vital to my creation of Isaac’s character. Finally, Madeline Miller’s first novel, *The Song of Achilles*, was particularly important to me, as she was able to turn the *Iliad*—a war epic—into a teenaged love story. What’s more, she was able to write a best-selling, critically acclaimed “literary” novel and still market it for young people.

During my undergraduate degree, I was made to believe that children’s books had less to offer the world than “real literature”—which was defined to me as for adults, non-adaptive, and non-genre specific. And so my interests as a writer became quite jumbled together in the realm of what was non-academy compliant: Young Adult and “genre” fiction, including fantasy and science fiction. I began to look outside of the classroom for inspiration. I read John Green, Rick Riordan, and Jandy Nelson. I read comic books—particularly Iron Man—and developed an interest in Spider-Man, not for the webshooters or wall-climbing, but for his longevity: what made a story last so long? Why did writers and movie-makers alike keep remaking his story when hundreds of other superheroes existed?

This was the beginning of my obsession with adaptation. But I did not know it then.

In my last semester in San Francisco, my favorite class at the time—Writers on Writing—hosted Daniel Handler to speak. He discussed his work as Lemony Snicket, though we were focused, of course, on his newest adult novel. In between comments on what it was like to go from children’s writing to adult, he said: “Children are harder to write for.” Children do not care, he said, if you come highly acclaimed, do not care how many awards you’ve won, do not



care if you are literary. They want an adventure, want to be captivated, and they want it on the first page. It was an affirmation. It was also a challenge.

I gave up trying to write for the academy, gave up trying to be literary. I began to write what I wanted to read as a child. And in turn, my influences came as much from literature as they did from movies and music. Arlen C's poetry was as much a part of my writing process as the release of British band Bastille's *Wild World* album, which I listened to on repeat while wandering the streets of Rome. With my headphones in, listening to the song "Glory," I wrote out the first outline of Isaac's plot while sitting on the steps of the Parthenon. Since returning to Hawai'i have continued to return to the album for inspiration.

The lyrics "Deep in the corner of the night / We were lying in the middle of the road / Counting the planes as they flew by" were the foundation for a scene that did not yet have a plot (Bastille). All I knew for certain was that Icarus and Apollo would be watching the skies together, tracking the planes overhead. This scene did not make it into the final version of the novel, but I wrote several varieties of the same core events: Apollo and Isaac as kids, laying on Apollo's roof and sky-gazing, Apollo saying that his father—owner of a world-renowned airline—owned the whole sky. The scene, in all its iterations, was cut to make the first chapter more present and immediate, but the image was the cornerstone for Isaac and Apollo's relationship. Further in the song, the speaker questions "Stories told to me/ And stories told to you / Did you ever feel / Like they were ringing true? / And all their words for glory / Well they always sounded empty / When we're looking up for heaven / Way down here upon the ground" (Bastille). This became the inspiration for this book's underlying conflict: what is missed in our present lives when we become too fixated on our heroes, on the future, and on the past?

The plot of the first novel in the series, *Isaac and the Sun King* (IatSK) is, in short, the realization of Isaac's deep dissatisfaction with his life as it manifests through his relationship with Apollo. His fascination with Apollo mimics, in many ways, his dissatisfaction with himself; in his friend, he sees what he lacks: money, popularity, grace. It's a common enough theme in Young Adult literature: self-confidence and the tendency young people (and in truth, most adults as well) have to glorify those they perceive as perfect, while seeing themselves as less in comparison. Mass-culture has a way of deifying celebrities, or in teen culture, the jock or popular student. This process became, in my novel, quite literal. Isaac is human, and Apollo a god. In the face of this realization—that immortal, "perfect" beings exist—the question of the novel becomes: how do we face our own humanity?

In an essay for my Introduction to Literature course with Professor Nandini Chandra, "Late Capitalism as Greek Tragedy," I discuss what I call "the god story:" that is, the use of immortal, all-powerful beings as scapegoats for our own feelings of impotency in the face of capitalism. Because the system seems incomprehensible and too difficult to fix, we invent beings who might take the fall; we make the all-powerful approachable, the intangible tangible. This is certainly the case in *IatSK*, as Isaac, the lead character, comes from a place of abject poverty and sees his job with the Skylar family as a way to fix the deep hole he and his father have been nearly buried in.

But there is also the issue of race, and it is one that cannot be overlooked. Because I have made Apollo Black—which I would argue can be traced historically, though that is beyond the scope of this introduction—Isaac's fascination and self-identification with Apollo becomes not just a form of god-escapism, but of fetishization.

During my undergraduate degree, I first read James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues," and it had an instrumental effect on the aesthetics of my writing and on my topics. For years afterward, I remained obsessed with stories of addiction and trauma and their role within a family unit. At UHM, however, under the supervision of professor Jack Taylor, I dove deeper into Baldwin's bibliography. What was particularly interesting to me in Baldwin's work was what a good friend of mine calls "friendly racists." In many of Baldwin's works, there arrives a character who has the best of intentions, who loves, befriends, dates Black characters—and is genuine in his affections—but who also fails to understand the situation of Black America and instead manifests their own insecurities upon Black bodies. We see this same fetishization in the more modern horror movie, *Get Out*, where Black is seen as fashionable, trendy, and artistically inclined. In the film, Black bodies are literally taken over and worn by white people with shortcomings or disabilities: for example, the blind man who wants the main character's eyes.

As Apollo is the god of music and art, this history of Black body as entertainment and fetish was important to address, albeit I have only begun to scrape the surface through this first book, written in the point of view of a white-passing boy. I say white-passing because Isaac's mother is Mexican and because in his many previous lives, he has had mothers of many different ethnicities and nationalities. However, his father, Daedalus, is, in my version of the myth, an immortal being that has never been reincarnated and as so has always been Greek. In this first book, Isaac appears white himself and has been raised without Mexican influences—though he will begin to understand more about his mother and his culture in Book 2 and beyond. Furthermore, throughout the first book, Isaac must address his privilege even as he deals with his own hardships, and Apollo—who has lived a life of economic privilege—must begin to open his

eyes to continued anti-Black sentiment in the U.S.. I hope to address these issues further as the series continues.

Another character, Hades, is written as Middle Eastern, a choice I made in order to begin to address Islamophobia in the U.S.. Hades, in this book and others, is often scapegoated as villain, often seen as overly violent, and, of course, a bringer of death. I felt that these undue assumptions are often mimicked in the U.S. as they relate to Middle Eastern immigrants and citizens—particularly now with Trump’s “Muslim Ban”—through the assumption of terrorism and violence. The rivalry between Zeus—an embodiment of capitalism—and Hades, can then be read as the assumption of Muslim citizens and immigrants to be “Anti-American.” Hades, in the end, is innocent, and it is Zeus’ behavior—the bridges he’s burned along the way—that bring troubles raining down upon him.

All of this may seem unrelated to Greek mythology, but it was through my course with Dr. Bacchilega that I saw the extent that Greek stories have stretched into modern day. In Spike Lee’s 2015 film *Chi-Raq*, for example, he compares the Greek-on-Greek war addressed in the 411 BCE play, *Lysistrata*, to the Black-on-Black crime in Chicago in which more Americans have died than in the Iraq war. What’s more, my research led me to the realization that Greek history and mythology is not even, solely, Greek. It is formed, similar in origin to the Oceanic creation stories spread throughout the Pacific, by ocean-faring people between the Mediterranean region, Middle East, and Northern Africa. Though these stories may have been told an ocean away, they are still well-known in the Americas and across the world. Adaptation leaves room to continue the conversation, to utilize the same stories for new purposes across thousands of miles and hundreds of years.

This sentiment was not only crucial to the story's creation, but it wove its way into the aesthetics of the piece. At the beginning of each chapter, I open the narrative with a quote. These are meant to supplement the topics of the chapter, but also to show the vastly different uses to which Greek mythology has been put to over the years. The epigraphs include lines from mythology books, from modern poets, from novels, and from works by my cohort here at UHM. It was important for me to give credit to these influences, but the book itself also benefited from these inclusions. In the novel, Isaac is beginning to awake from what we can call a 2000+ year slumber; in this process, he notices the hints of these past lives all around—Greek architecture, idioms, remnants of old words and lessons that hold a strange familiarity. And because of the way pop culture works—in which we are collectively saturated with the same allusions—this is true even in life. As I write this, I sit listening to the highly acclaimed and popular Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, and hear the story quoted as fleeting reference: “You’ve married an Icarus / He’s flown too close to the sun.” The play is in itself proof of the power of adaptation. American history, like Greek history, has been whitewashed and heteronormatized. The heroes of our country were never allowed to be anything else, and yet, some modern stories ask: what if they were? Adaptation is, at least in some cases, a strategy of turning this saturation of colonial discourse and propaganda into positive power.

There is much to be gained in re-educating ourselves, pointing out where queer people and POC have played crucial roles in our histories and stories. But it is also important to strike where popularity already exists, to take the already known names—like Spiderman, the Greek gods, the founding fathers—and say: they could be anyone. This is seen in the newest Spiderman adaptation, *Into the Spiderverse*, where the sentiment “anyone could be behind the mask” is taken quite literally, and we see a white female Spiderman, a half-Black, half-Latino male

Spiderman, a Japanese female Spiderman, and more. I wanted to follow in these footsteps and open up the possibilities for Icarus and Apollo, for Persephone and Hades, for these names that have lasted thousands of years and these stories we still tell today. I have also, in the process, queered Icarus' quest for freedom. If the sun is Apollo, then Icarus' daring flight—his desire to be free and to fly—is also a desire for queer love outside of heterosexual constraints.

In re-interpreting past stories, I was forced to deal with the characters' memories of their past lives and past selves. As much as memory is, in the novel, a source of renewal, strength, and long-forgotten power, it is also a place of trauma. As I wrote, I read a variety of scientific studies on memory and PTSD, but I also watched the HBO show *Westworld*, tracking carefully the way in which the AI characters would react to memories of past injury before their memories were reset. This story, about a theme park in which there are no rules and no consequences, and the AIs—who are raped and mutilated daily—begin to grow consciousness, can be interpreted as a metaphor for intergenerational trauma. The park visitors mimic the European settlers in America—thinking of their expansion only as a game, a quest for gold and glory—and the AI's as colonized peoples and victims of cultural genocide. Each time they are “reset,” their memories are wiped, but particularly devastating moments still bleed through. If we are to interpret this as intergenerational trauma, or postmemory, then we can see the “reset” characters as the children of acts of cultural genocide; they have not yet felt the pain themselves, but it lives on in their bodies and minds, and the violence is inevitably repeated by the dominant society that has not yet learned its lesson.

In my novel, the gods take the role of the colonizer and humans of the colonized. However, the novel imagines an alternative universe where, after generations of gods “playing” with humans—cursing them, harming them, all without consequence—the god of death finally

steps in and puts an end to their “playtime.” She curses the gods to live as humans, to finally understand their suffering first-hand. In this process, they might also begin to comprehend the beauty and value of humanity.

My influences in building this world were vast and varied, but the aesthetic approach came from the current market of Young Adult novels. Therefore, the voice is in the first person—the “norm” for the age group—and aims to carry in the narration the emotional turmoil of Isaac’s age: a sixteen-year-old boy handling an adult-sized mystery. A very structural writer, I began with the most technical constraints tied to the demographic: that the book should be between 60,000-80,000 words, that each chapter should be roughly 20-pages, that each individual book in the series must have a completed arc, and yet it must be open-ended enough to continue the series.

*Isaac and the Sun King* finishes at 79,000 words, and I hope that this first arc feels complete. I see the first book as having a twofold plot; that is, an external and internal conflict. Externally, Isaac must solve the mystery of who has been tinkering with the planes and threatening Skylar Air; internally, he must learn to be independent, to break away from his father, and to pursue his own goals (i.e. to fly away from the nest). This plot is fairly standard in YA: the teenaged character must find some sort of self-actualization. While Middle Level books tend to focus on family and friends, YA focuses on identity and romance. There are hints at romance throughout this novel, but this is a plot I see as over-arching throughout the series and one that will not be fulfilled in the first installment. In the end, this book is part a coming-of-age novel, part detective adventure, but ultimately, it is about relationships and how they are shaped by the body and by time. It is about two boys who must find common ground.

## Here Comes the Sun

“They flew together over the palace grounds, over the beaches, and headed out to sea. A shepherd looked up and saw them; and a fisherman looked up and saw them; and they both thought they saw gods flying.”

Bernard Evslin, *Heroes, Gods, and Monsters of the Greek Myths*

The first time I met a god, I was five years old and chasing his shadow through a trove of olive trees. He was my age then, but already so much brighter. His golden eyes flashed as he sprinted out of reach, dreadlocks bouncing onto his vivid yellow t-shirt. Some days, I can even remember the stranger who used to watch us play: a woman with bright red hair and black eyes who I’d see hiding behind the trees. My father says I made her up. He reckons she was an imaginary friend, a replacement for my mother who skipped town that year. And maybe he’s right. In all this time, I haven’t heard a word from my mother or the mystery woman, but in the eleven years that have passed, the olive trees have grown to the size of skyscrapers, and the little god exists today only in my dreams.

“As you can see, we’ve made a few changes.”

The man speaking now could be my boss—if only I’m on my best behavior. He leans an elbow against one of the olive trunks and stares up at his colossal house with a dreamy expression, like he’s realizing for the first time that he owns half our town. He’s as tall as a mountain himself, with dirty-blond hair, a thick goatee, and a freshly-pressed white button-up that makes his light skin appear tanned. The woods around him are empty today: no strange



woman, no yellow-dressed boy, no sound but the birds chirping and the man's endless, droning speech.

He's been talking for ten minutes at least, giving me the play-by-play of all his greatest accomplishments, as if I haven't heard it all before, haven't read the company pamphlet back to front and spent half of my life at playdates with his son. When my dad used to work here—before he quit, got cursed, and never worked a steady job again—I used to listen at the doors of their meetings and memorize every adult word I could pronounce. This is Mr. Zachary Skylar, the founder and CEO of Skylar Air, airline extraordinaire, who's offering me a job that hasn't been filled in three years because the application alone required three letters of recommendation, two essays, and a blueprint of your own invention.

He can rant all he wants; I made it this far, and I'm not going anywhere.

“Do you have any questions?”

I have at least ten—like when did he chop down all the hedges his son and I used to hide behind during games of Hide-and-Seek? And do you need a parent to sign off on the job forms? But I bite my lip. My father always taught me that the way to success was to keep your head down, and by now, my neck is sore from staring at my own shoe laces. Questions are for people who have money in their pockets, not coupons for 50% off the dollar menu.

“No, Sir.”

But when Mr. Skylar turns around, I still can't help but stare at his world. Once upon a time, this place felt like home. Behind the olive tree, the glass house stretches across the hillside. It's as if the middle-ages threw up all over modern-day California, so instead of a castle looking out toward its minions, the Skylar mansion stares over all its dominion, reflecting back Epáratos County in postcard-ready glory.

My dad and I used to be welcome guests here; now we're more like the serfs. Luckily, the rotting, fish-laden docks by my house are too far away to bother anyone here. On this side of town, there's nothing but big houses and sandy beaches—chilly and wind swept, but always, a glittering white gold.

Two stories up, a brown, bright-eyed face stares out the window. Then the curtains are drawn, and he disappears.

Mr. Skylar chooses that moment to drop a heavy hand onto my shoulder and squeeze until my bones rattle. I dig my hands into my pockets and tap five times against the edge of my cellphone, as if I can call for help just by osmosis. But it's too late to turn back now. I need this job more than I need to run away.

“Come along, young Mr. Hagar,” he says.

I have never been addressed as “Mr.” anything before—I have hardly even heard my dad addressed so formally—but I'm quick to obey, following the man up the long, cobbled walkway and toward the mansion's front steps. Great, eight-foot-tall statues flank us on either side: giggling nymphs, only half dressed, standing in frozen pools of marble. It makes me blush just to look at them.

Mr. Skylar gives the statues a smile so charming and plastic, it could have been on the cover of *Forbes Magazine*. “The gods would lose their minds for those frisky wood nymphs,” he says. “Always up to so much mischief. Drove Zeus crazy.”

I've heard this part before too. I nod. The hallway is just as I remember it: everything white from the walls to the curtains to the vases and the umbrella holder. The walls are lined with photographs, but it's what's hung on the far side of the room that catches my eye.

An oil painting the size of my whole garage door shows the Olympian Gods filling the world with all their creations: Zeus touching the sky, Poseidon the water, Hades the underworld where a sea of screaming, gray-tinged spirits hover, their bodies contorted for all time. The first time I saw the painting, I was five years old and not even tall enough to reach the bottom of the canvas. Now, I am eye to eye with Zeus, and the blue in his gaze is so electric, I swear it shoots out of the canvas and down my spine.

“Gods,” repeats Mr. Skylar. He, too, stares at the painting, though he spends his time smiling at Zeus. He must take my silence for confusion—must have forgotten the dozen times he told me this same story when I was a kid. “The Greek gods. I got that painting in Paris. Original. Cost a fortune, but it was worth it.”

Mr. Skylar has always loved this speech—or at least, loved the sound of his own voice telling it—but there’s one question I’ve never asked. “Is that why you named your son—”

Mr. Skylar steamrolls over my sentence, putting a finger to his lips like I’ve uttered some horrible secret.

“His mother and I thought ourselves very clever at the time. My wife now doesn’t agree.” He lets out a bark of laughter that must be the least amusing sound I’ve ever heard. I’ve heard screams more convincing than his smile. But my father always taught me to be polite. I think of the bills we haven’t paid and the non-existent college-fund my dad claims he’s filling, and I smile back.

A foot or so beside the oil painting, a row of portraits takes up the rest of the wall. Most feature the same four people: a grinning, tanned man; a stern looking white woman with a ring on her finger but no smile on her lips; two young children refusing to pose. In the photograph nearest to me, the woman squints against the sun, disheveled hair swirling around her flushed

face while a boy of no older than four tugs on her skirt. There is a baby on her hip, pale and pink with a leg that curls up toward his body, as crooked and skinny as a telephone cord.

“Don’t look at those,” says Mr. Skylar. He hasn’t stopped smiling, but his light blue eyes are far from friendly.

Someone moves upstairs: light footsteps, like a dancer’s, but no face to connect them to, no eyes peering down over the railing. There’s a tingling in my legs, a building desperation to go flying up the stairs and follow the sound to its source. It travels through my spine and settles in my fingertips. My mom used to say curiosity is the root of what makes us human; but my dad still reminds me it’s what killed the cat.

I clench my fists and shove them in my pockets. *Tap, tap, tap, tap.*

“You know,” says Mr. Skylar. “I didn’t think you’d come. Not after...well the way our families left things.”

“A lot has changed over the years,” I say. I try to keep the smile in place, but it’s starting to feel crooked.

“Indeed, young man,” says Mr. Skylar. “Indeed.”

I follow him down the hall, past a photograph, smaller than all the others and tucked into a corner where no sun can reach it. The shadows dance across the glossy surface, but I instantly recognize the face smiling back at me. Deep brown skin and amber eyes filled with curiosity—the little god, just like I remember him, buzzing with excitement and ready to set off, zero to a hundred any second.

“He’s dying to see you,” says Mr. Skylar. He smiles, smiles, smiles, and stares down at me like I’m a bug under his magnifying glass. “Just look at how big you’ve grown! Last time I saw you, you were what, eight? Nine?”

“Twelve.”

I’m not sure he hears me. He strokes his goatee and contemplates something over my head. When I look over my shoulder, I find a portrait of Mr. Skylar himself, looking prim and important in a tux with a golden, shimmering award in his hand. “Well,” he says. “Come along.”

We walk side by side—or at least try to. Mr. Skylar’s pace is almost impossible to keep up with. We descend a transparent flight of stairs to the basement; he takes it two steps at a time, strides eclipsing mine. I watch my feet carefully, taking each step as if it’ll be my last. I don’t want to fall. Not here. Not yet. Not at all if I can swing it.

See, for as long as I can remember, I’ve had a dream that starts just like this.

In the dream, I tumble down a stone staircase, or out a ten-story window, or from the roof of a tower prison. In the dreams, I always have wings, and I flap as hard as I can, but my feathers just tumble off, and scatter to the winds.

I fall.

Olive trees turn to ocean waves, rippling seas threatening to eat me whole. I flap and flap, kick my legs, grasp uselessly at the air, but still the ocean beneath me grows closer, and soon I can smell the salt, the fish. The golden-eyed boy watches while a woman with red hair yells, telling him that this madness has gone on long enough. Neither reaches out to help me.

It’s always the same.

Now—in the waking world—the glass steps into the basement feel a lot like those waves, like slippery water beneath my feet, like falling is not just likely, but eminent, inevitable.

Mr. Skylar’s laughter echoes across the glass and puts my stomach in knots.

“It trips everyone up the first time,” he says. “No pun intended.”

I swear we descend forever.

Then finally, we touch down on solid, concrete ground.

At the bottom of the stairs, the whole world changes. Rock music blares across a room made of metal and concrete, with blackboards for walls and a giant airplane fuselage crumpled in the center. The wing lays beside it, stripped to wire and bracket: a corpse with all its bones showing. Leaning over a giant table smothered in blueprints, Mr. Skylar's eleven-year-old son, Fergus, nods his head to the music, tapping his one flesh-and-blood foot against the cement floor while the bionic prosthetic that replaced the shriveled leg he was born with remains a steady presence on the floor.

He looks up when we enter. Fergus takes after his mother—or at least, what I remember of her: a pale hardened face, all sharp angles, flushed pink cheeks, and sparse, light brown hair. He says, “Dad, I figured it out,” but his expression is no less dire than if he had just announced the end of the world.

Mr. Skylar approaches the table and hovers over the drawings. He hums. “Now that,” he says, pointing to the center of what looks to be a cockpit. “That just won’t calculate. Keep trying.”

He turns to me, bright smile back in place, white teeth blinding, and throws his arms out like he’s inviting me to Heaven. “This,” he says, “is the workshop. My very own.”

When Fergus coughs, Mr. Skylar amends, “The family workshop. It’s where the magic happens. And where you will be helping us to change the world. Come and look.”

I follow Mr. Skylar to the table, sidling up beside Fergus who gives me a look that says *I remember you, but I’m not sure from where*. The three of us duck our heads and stare at a giant plan marked: *Top Secret*. Amongst the notes, calculations, and sticky-note memos, the outline

shows the control room of a plane, but the place where the pilot should sit is filled instead with machinery.

“The first pilot-less plane,” says Mr. Skylar, his voice thick with ecstasy. “Efficient. Free from human error. The future of aviation. It’s almost finished. But it’s crunch time now. We launch in two months.”

This is what I’ve been called here for. This is the reason Mr. Skylar broke our family’s four-year code of silence and responded to my job application. I’m going to be an intern on the first-pilotless plane. I can taste the excitement—like popcorn and cotton candy; I feel like I’m floating out of my body.

Both Mr. Skylar and Fergus turn to stare at me. My cheeks flush.

It’s comforting to know that on a plane, even if you are falling to your death, the air is filtered cleaner than a hospital’s. It isn’t like that in this basement. In the time it takes me to gather my wits, I breathe in every trace of metal and the egg sandwich Fergus must have had for lunch. I shuffle my feet and study the blueprint, not yet daring to meet either of their eyes. In my pocket, my fingers tap of their own accord—tap, tap, tap, tap, tap against the cool metal of my phone.

“And you think my invention can help?” I ask the table.

“Your what?” asks Mr. Skylar.

“The blueprint I submitted, Sir.”

“Oh, I didn’t look at that.” Mr. Skylar waves my words away as if grabbing them out of the air. I imagine them tossed in the nearest trashcan.

I spent three months on that, three months ignoring my homework and stealing library books, so I could draft more efficient airplane wings. But my dad's voice in my head tells me to be polite, so I smile through my teeth. "What's my job going to be then?"

"Anything and everything," says Mr. Skylar. "Running errands, making copies, getting lunch, grabbing coffee, keeping us motivated. We need more hands on deck, and it had to be someone we could trust. We need someone who...well, knows how to mind his own business. Who better than a Hagar back in the building?"

His laugh is no more comforting than it had been ten minutes ago, no more reassuring than the first day I'd met him, but the last eleven years have taught me how to smile in his presence. Finally, I meet his eyes and see a crackle of electricity run through their icy blue.

But that's not possible.

I blink, rub my knuckles over my own eyes. This is what happens when you don't sleep more than an hour a night, when your whole life is plagued by those dumb, falling nightmares.

That, or it was just a trick of the light.

I clear my throat and nod. "Happy to be on board, Sir. Or, uh. In the garage."

"Now that's the spirit," says Mr. Skylar. "Your father must be so proud."

I doubt it. My father is proud when I bring home more than a C on my report card and don't ask for expensive birthday presents. He won't be proud that I've agreed to a secret job with his arch enemy. The day my father quit his job with Skylar Air, he'd sworn we'd never come back here, and as far as I know, he's kept his side of the bargain. But he also doesn't have two pennies to rub together, so his decision-making skills are really subpar at best.

My father is great at walking—could make the world's best pair of bionic legs if you asked him—but he just doesn't understand flying. Bessie Coleman, the first African-American



and Indigenous American pilot, had to go all the way to France to get her license; all I have to do is bus across town a few times a week and lie to my father, my best friend.

With a bowling ball in my throat, I follow Mr. Skylar back to his office and sign my name on one form after another.

Outside the door, I hear the scuffling on the stairs again.

“And you’re old enough for this job?” asks Mr. Skylar.

I nod and point to my birthday on the form. “I’m sixteen. Today, Sir.”

“Ah. Happy birthday.” He looks up and smiles, maybe because it’s my sweet-sixteen and he’s happy for me, or maybe just because he can’t be arrested for breaking child labor laws.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Well, I have things to go and places to see. You’ll let yourself out, won’t you?” He points me to the door. Settling down behind a black wood desk, face pointed and eyes on his computer, he’s hard to reconcile with the happy go-lucky man that had led me into his home. This is Mr. Skylar at work, as serious and distant as the stuffed eagle mounted behind his head.

I tiptoe through the doorway.

Out in the hall, the photographs glare down at me, gods watching as I stare between the front door and the elegant, suddenly silent staircase. The clock above the wall tells me I should get home, but there’s a buzzing in my legs, a clambering on my ribcage that sounds too much like those moving feet: scuffling, waiting, hiding. Just around the corner. A god that isn’t painted.

Five more minutes can’t kill me.

I creep up the first set of stairs, to the second story, then the third, until I’m bursting out of the metal door at the very top.

The roof is just like I remember it: a giant oasis, so far above the city, I am sure I can touch the sky. Beneath the house is nothing but empty pavement, but beyond it lays all the beauty of the city: the parks, the cliffs, the ocean where it meets the horizon.

My father and I have lived in the same house all my life, a tiny one story with a view of the city dump out one window and a row of equally tiny houses out the other. Our chances of seeing the world like this are close to obsolete. Now, my breath is caught in my throat, and I'm tiptoeing closer to the edge when I hear voices shouting below.

Appearing more like ants than people, a man in a huge white bathrobe stands in the center of the street, arguing with a woman who—my heart summersaults into my stomach—wears her vivid red hair in a bun.

It's the woman from my dreams. The woman from my childhood. Only she isn't hiding; she's out in the open, screaming at the top of her lungs and looking like an over-sized ladybug.

It's not possible and it doesn't make any sense. As far as I know—as far as I've been told—she's not a real person, just some hallucination I've made up at night, like blood in human form, or a terrifying, personified stop-sign. I rub my knuckles over my eyes once more.

She doesn't disappear. She waves her hands in the air and shouts: "You're overwhelming him! It's too much too soon. He's still too young."

If the man replies, I can't hear him. I've never seen him before, never dreamed of him. I creep closer to the edge, listening hard, just as a voice behind me rings out, "Remember the last time we were up here?"

I turn to see Apollo Skylar, the boy named after a god with golden eyes and long brown dreadlocks, older than I'd last seen him, bigger, like he's sprouted muscles in every possible direction. He stands barefoot in the center of the roof, hands in his pockets. He grins.

I try to say hello, but my foot slips, and in a whirl of wind, I tumble off the edge of the roof.

I'm falling, but unlike my dreams, reality grants no wings—not that they ever did me any good.

My arms flail, a scream gets caught in my throat, and I can't stop it, can't fly, can't do anything but plummet closer to the earth. I'm sixteen, going on dead.

If life is meant to flash before your eyes at the last moment, then my life is nothing but a blue blur.

And then my back touches something soft and solid and painless. The impact knocks the air out of my lungs, and the hazy world comes into focus one detail at a time: an abandoned mattress that certainly wasn't here a moment before, an exploded duvet whose feathers have cushioned my fall. The woman with vivid red hair stands above me, her face flushed with worry.

I gasp to catch my breath. When I blink, she's gone.

## Red Requiem

“A voice like music, above me. I look up to see a man leaning on the walls as if sunning, dark hair to his shoulders, a quiver and bow slung casually around his torso. Startled, I slip a little, my knees scraping the rock. He is piercingly beautiful, smooth skin and a finely cut face that glows with something more than human.”

Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles*

I’m still searching the street for a glimpse of red when Apollo’s panicked face obscures my vision. He’s ten shades of worried, eyes bigger than I ever knew anyone’s eyes could be, and his long hair is tangled in his face. A strand blows across his lips, swinging as it catches the wind of his every, heavy breath. I haven’t figured out how to move, how to remind my shaking legs that I’m alive, that this fall wasn’t *the* fall—the horrible, all consuming, life-over sort of fall that my dreams told me it would be. The mattress is soft under my back, and though every muscle in my body aches—definitely going to be bruises tomorrow—I’m *fine*, and I know it. So why doesn’t it feel that way?

“Thank God, you’re okay,” says Apollo, and it takes me a moment to realize he means the one in the sky—the big, all-powerful, one-deity-to-rule-them-all God—and not the kind like him: people that are too good at everything and who walk through life like it’s their playground.

He’s leaning over me, and in my paralyzed state, there’s nothing I can do but play patient, stiff under his hands as they check me for broken bones or bleeding hernias, or whatever else is supposed to happen when you fall off the roof of a three-story mansion.

I should feel dazed. I should feel confused. The distance I'd plummeted alone should have rattled my brain. But all I feel is excited, curious, the adrenaline pumping through my veins like I've been given an IV of it. I'm shaking, but this time, it isn't nerves that have my fingers tapping against my side; I just can't lay still.

My dad was right: this was exactly how the cat died, and I think I'm okay with that.

It's Apollo's t-shirt—still obnoxious yellow after all these years, like a happy face on steroids, with a tiny red flower on the shoulder—that finally spurs me to sit up. Red like the woman's hair. Red like my dreams. Red like my savior.

I jump to my feet, my heart pounding, which must mean that I'm okay, that I'm alive. And that doesn't make any sense; but that a woman from my dreams—a woman I thought I'd invented—had stood over me just seconds ago makes even less sense.

"I have to find her." It's as though my legs have grown a mind of their own, making up for lost time by throwing me into a jog and compelling me down the sidewalk. "I think she went this way."

The buildings in this neighborhood aren't at all like the ones where I live: grimy and crowded, with feral cats rubbing their backs up against the cracked cement and meowing until you agree to feed them or bring one home.

Here, the nicely paved roads stretch out for ages, empty and quiet but for the faint sound of birds chirping overhead and children laughing on the playground a street over. The giant structures whizz by—brown, gray, red, brown again—blurs that normally would have convinced me to stop and smell the roses like my dad is always barking at me to do, but right now, they feel more like bars on a cage. Bricks, and bricks, and more bricks, keeping me from finding her.

Apollo jogs to catch up. "Who?"

“The woman with the red hair.”

“Who’s the woman with the red hair?”

“I don’t know. That’s the point! I have to find her.”

I slip down a wide street lined with cafes and restaurants and a barber shop filled with elderly, early morning customers. Turning left off the street and toward a cluster of short bricked buildings, a flash of red hair catches my eye.

I break into a run.

“Where are you going? Isaac! What’s going on?” Apollo is yelling after me, but I don’t stop. I can’t. I have to know where Red Hair is going, have to find her before she’s lost to my nightmares, just another figment of my ‘overactive imagination’ that my dad can laugh off and tell me to forget.

Apollo has gotten faster since the last time we’d met, and back then, he’d already beaten me in every race, won every single game of tag. Though still barefoot, he runs to catch up then keeps my strides without breaking a sweat.

“For someone with a possible concussion, you’re very fast,” he says. “You should really stop, you know! See a doctor!”

I face him, see an avalanche of different emotions pass through his expression (*this kid is crazy*, being the key player), but when I turn back to the road, the red apparition has disappeared. With sweat dripping down my forehead, I scan the buildings, the streets, searching for any indication of where she’s gone: a red shadow, an open door, a voice in the wind telling me where to go.

Then Apollo points to a nursing home at the end of the block. “There!”

Behind an aged sign reading “Epáratos Retirement,” a charming white building glistens in the sunlight, and Red Hair drifts toward a wooden front door. Blocking the entrance, three older women sit in rocking chairs, knitting what appears to be a giant gold and blue blanket. Woven into an ocean-like pattern, human figures crawl, walk, then die. Red Hair tiptoes around them, patting one woman on the shoulder, another on the hand, then she vanishes through the door. As Apollo and I race up the center steps, the door slams closed behind her.

“Wait!” I’m panting, my lungs swelling with every step as I reach out for the door, Apollo right on my heels. But when I thrust a hand toward the doorknob, one of the kindly old women clicks her tongue, suddenly looking far less friendly, and far more like a vengeful ghost.

Staring through glasses as thick as my palm, her eyes horribly magnified to ten times a normal human size, she raises a pair of black scissors and aims the sharp end toward my throat. “Where do you think you’re going, Young Man?”

I have never had a grandma—at least not that I know of—but I’ve always imagined that visiting one would be like it is on TV: fresh baked cookies, TV dinners, and stories about the good ol’ times. I never expected to be murdered by one.

I take a step backwards, arms flailing as I point uselessly at the door. “I need to talk to her,” I say. “That woman. Do you know her? I—she was there—I need to ask...”

“No one comes in without an appointment and someone to visit. Now you two troublemakers head on back home.” The old woman lowers her scissors and uses them to snip the end of the thread she’s been knitting. The frayed end snaps off and falls to her feet in a pile of others just like it: strands of gold and blue and red and green and deep, blood red. The two women beside her hum without looking up, and the one on the left reaches for the glasses, whispering, “My turn, Dear.”

I walk back to the curb with my heart in my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” says Apollo.

I shake my head. “You didn’t do anything.”

“I think I scared you straight off the roof.”

“I wasn’t scared.” The words don’t sound nearly as casual or convincing as I’d hoped they would.

“Right,” says Apollo. “Well I’m sorry you didn’t get to talk to her. What was that about?”

If only I knew. “She was there. When I fell, she was standing over me. I see her sometimes. In my dreams. Just like I see you—” I stop talking at once and briefly consider throwing myself off the nearest bridge, one preferably without a mattress underneath to break my fall. It would certainly be better than standing here, my cheeks a furnace, cursing every moment I ever opened my mouth, cursing my own birth while I’m at it. If I could fly away like the Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird, I’d be gone from here at 2,193 miles an hour.

Apollo’s mouth is doing something I don’t dare to decipher—it’s part laugh, I think, and part curious frown. When I was a kid, I used to wish I could read minds, but right now, I’ve never been more thankful that dream fell through. I can imagine what he’s thinking easily enough—that he can’t believe he got stuck spending the afternoon with that weird kid his dad made him play with when he was younger. Maybe he’s wondering how to escape without hurting my feelings.

Then he clears his throat, rubs the back of his neck, and says, “I’m really glad you’re okay. I was so scared. When you stepped back, I thought—”

“I’m okay.”



“Good.” Apollo’s smile widens. His hand drops back to his side.

“Are you?” I ask. I gesture hopelessly to his feet. If there was glass on the road, he’d be done for.

He picks his feet up one at a time. “Just a little dirty. Roads are pretty safe around here. Most dangerous thing around here is my—”

“Your sister,” I finish for him, and we both laugh.

“My dad didn’t say you were coming by,” he says. “Is your dad coming back to work? I’ve missed—”

I don’t hear the rest of what he says because the word ‘dad’ sends sirens blaring in my brain. This is the part where most teenagers tell you they’ll be grounded for life, that they hate hearing their parents yell at them. But as I’ve only got the one parent, I already know exactly what he’ll say, and it won’t be yelling. It’ll be that calm rationality, that disappointment that says: we only have each other, and we can’t afford to let each other down. We can’t leave each other the way my mom left us both.

For the first time that afternoon, I’m not worrying about sounding stupid or about who the woman with the mysterious red hair might be. “My dad is going to freak out. He’ll think I’m dead,” I tell Apollo. “He’ll put out missing posters. He’ll send a watch party. ” The sun is low in the sky, a clear sign that I should already be on a bus back home. “I have to get home. Right now.”

“I can drive you.” Though he’s doing me a favor, Apollo’s face is one giant neon sign of hope. He nods back toward his father’s house, that beacon of shining glass taller than the rest of the block. I’m powerless to do anything but agree.

“The chariot awaits. I think I’ve got shoes in the car,” he says as we wind back down the street, past the barber shop, and into the brick jungle. “It must be summer.”

When we were kids and my father still worked for his, we’d spend every summer together—every day, nearly every hour. But that had been years ago. “It’s been a long time,” I say. “You still go to that fancy school?”

Apollo nods, but he doesn’t elaborate. Maybe he’s thinking the same thing I am: that his private prep-school costs more a semester than my dad makes in a year, or that I’d never have the grades to get in anyway. Bessie Coleman wouldn’t have worried about that sort of thing, but then, I’m not sure that Apollo even knows who Bessie is. Maybe if your dad owns all the planes in town, you don’t worry so much about who used to fly them. Apollo never was much of a history buff, but his sister taught me everything I know about Coleman.

“It’s hard,” Apollo says after a long while. “Getting through science without your help.”

I grin. I have never gotten an A in any of my science class but that’s only because public school assignments are boring; it’s always been more fun to make my own experiments. Helping Apollo finish his elaborate private-school projects was always too easy. “I can help you now,” I offer.

“Yeah,” says Apollo. “Maybe. Dad hired a tutor. He’s kind of cool.”

“Oh,” I say.

We stop in front of his house, and Apollo types a code into the giant front gate.

“My mom doesn’t like me driving.” Apollo enters a second code, this time to the garage, and reveals a sea of vehicles that must have cost a couple of kidneys a piece. I spot a Porsche, a Jaguar, a Maserati, and a Mercedes Benz before we reach the yellow Lexus whose hood Apollo lovingly runs a hand over, top to bottom and back again. “She says I have to keep it here because

we don't have room for it at our house, but she really just thinks that if it's not at home, I won't ever drive it." As he speaks, he pulls a pair of tennis shoes out of the trunk.

I smirk. "I wonder what it's like to have an overprotective parent," I say and Apollo laughs. The last time I'd seen him, his father had taken both of us out on one of his private helicopters, and my father—height-fearer extraordinaire—never forgot it.

"You never told me what you were doing here," Apollo says again.

"I got a job. An intern. For you dad."

Apollo's lips curl downwards. If I didn't know him better, I'd think he was frowning.

He unlocks the car and slides into the driver's seat. I get in beside him, and he deposits the magic eight-ball into the cup holder after a hefty shake. I don't know what he's asked it, but the word inside reads 'yes' as we cruise out of the garage, down the neatly paved road, and back toward my side of town.

"Are you going to get in trouble for driving with me?" asks Apollo.

"Let's just say you should drop me off on the corner."

Apollo grimaces. "Your dad doesn't know you're working for mine, does he?"

I shake my head.

"I'll keep my dad from calling the house. Don't worry."

"Thank you."

For a long moment, the car is silent. The wind rips through the open window and sends my short hair flying backwards. Apollo's longer hair fans out around him, but he doesn't seem bothered by it, his eyes steady on the road. On the radio, an old-timey singer croons about lost love, but all I can think about is just how long four years really is and about how Apollo has a car

and likely plans to go to college. How many more clubs has he become the president of since I last saw him?

I'm thinking of the bag of chips on the dashboard and the blinding reflection of Apollo's necklace: a glass dolphin and within it, his name written on a single grain of rice. I'm thinking of anything and everything except how I almost died, or the creepy dreams, or why in the rearview mirror, I spot a crowd of people gathered around a park bench and an EMT with bright red hair wheeling an elderly woman into the back of the van.

I sit up straight in my chair, nosed pressed to the glass. But in the time it takes to blink, the woman's gone—maybe in the back of the truck, which is rolling away in the opposite direction, or maybe she never existed at all. Wasn't she supposed to be in a building on the other side of town? Wasn't she supposed to be working at that retirement home?

"Did you see that?"

"No. Driving," says Apollo, though there's still a smile on his lips. He risks a glance at me for half a second. When he catches sight of my expression, the smile drops. "What is it?"

What I saw—or at least what I *think* I saw—gets stuck on the tip of my tongue. Apollo and I had been friends before our abrupt separation, but it has still been four years, and I'm not keen on him thinking I'm off my rocker this soon into the reunion. "Nothing," I say. "I think I'm just tired."

"Or concussed," he points out.

"Yeah, or concussed." Or delusional. Or hallucinating. Or maybe a little bit of both. I tap my phone, but it just doesn't do the trick. I start to tap the window instead. "You really did see her, right? You weren't pretending? The woman with the red hair?"

“Disappearing into the retirement home? Yeah, I really saw her. You think I was just playing along?”

Relief settles deep and warm in my stomach. “No. Just making sure I didn’t hit my head too hard.” Or dream up a ghost.

Apollo’s smile returns. “I still think a doctor is a good idea.”

“Maybe next time,” I say, thinking of the dreams because even though Apollo’s full-body shudder tells me he’s not hoping for a repeat of the day’s events, I know there will be. One way or the other, when my head hits the pillow tonight, I’ll plummet to certain doom. Again.

I never asked Apollo if he saw the woman when we were kids; I never had the guts to. I certainly don’t now. I reach for the dashboard compartment, about to open it, before I remember it’s not mine. Maybe that’s how the cat died—roaming hands and forgetting boundaries.

It takes a tremendous effort to pull my gaze away from the window. I’m still blinking back images of red when I notice Apollo worrying his bottom lip through his teeth. “Next time you come by, we should get a burger or something,” he says.

He pulls the car off the highway and eases it down my embarrassment of a street. We rock through two pot holes before a cat stops in the middle of the road, hisses, and runs away. Apollo watches it go then parks down the street from my house, just as he’d promised.

“You still remember where I live?” I ask.

He nods. “I never forget a place. Here.” He pulls out his phone and gestures for mine. I give it without hesitation. He inserts his number and hands it back. “My dad can be a little overwhelming. Next time, call me, and you can tell me all about what a tool your new boss is over lunch.”

His smile is just like I remember it. It's a smile that says you can do anything you set your mind to.

I push my phone into my pocket and nod, my father's voice ringing in the back of my mind. He's head of my brain's security team, and right now he's shouting, urgent and dire and convinced that Apollo and his family are a bunch of no-good risk takers. If he was here, he'd remind me that the proof was right in their names: sky-people, a family floating in the clouds, and we Hagars were meant for solid ground. I wonder if anyone ever took a cat on a plane before. I know there have been monkeys in space, but are there curious cats?

"Thanks for the ride." I climb out of the car and ease the passenger door shut, aware that it's likely worth more than my whole life. "I'll...see you around then."

"Burgers," Apollo reminds me. "And hey, happy birthday. Hope you invite me to the party next year." He winks.

I wave and walk away, but I don't hear his engine rev until I'm already around the corner. My address and my birthday—Apollo must have the memory of a genius. Or at least those people I've read about who remember everything they've ever seen, like they've taken a picture of it in their minds.

I take my steps slowly, carefully, the day's events drifting back to me in flashes. It's the world's worst "Previously On", and it doesn't get any easier the closer I get to the house. The job. The fall. The weirdest birthday of my life. Not to mention that I've had very little practice in lying to my dad, and today I've done it twice.

I've only seen my dad upset—truly upset—twice in my life: the day my mother left, and the day he quit Skylar Air. Both times, I'd talked him down, convinced him to take deep breaths and got him some tissues; neither time, though, had I been the bad guy.

I take another step. And another.

Why Apollo would remember where I live is a mystery better left to the gods; my house is just as unexciting as I left it. At only one story tall, it might as well be fall proof—at least the plunge wouldn't kill you—and it looks just like every other house on the block: beige paint, short brownish-green grass, and an overflowing heap of trash that just gets bigger and bigger every week the collection crew stays on strike. The only exciting part about any of it is the mailbox. Designed by my dad himself, the copper surface shimmers day and night with giant gears that unlock and open up only for the mailman. I've been begging my dad for years to teach me how it's made—how it knows the mailman from any other man walking by—but he insists that my years as his mechanical apprentice won't start until I graduate high school, and that's still two years away.

The word *apprentice* summons visions of Mr. Skylar's smirking face and my new, secret job. Knots form in my stomach, twisting and turning until I'm sure my intestines are spelling out *liar*.

"Isaac? Is that you?" My father's voice drifts out from the back room the moment I open the door. "I'm in the shop!"

There's no going back now. I step inside. Since the dawn of time, teenagers have lied to their parents—and almost none of them have ever plummeted from the skies because of it, no matter how many nightmares they have.

Inside, there's no denying where I am, no way for my house to blend into the neighborhood because everywhere there's a flat surface, there's also a clock, or a mechanical box, or a robot with clicking gears and whizzing machinery, wires poking out in every direction, whizzing sounds filling my ears like they're a part of the air itself. Being in my house is like

living inside my mailbox, only bigger and louder, and behind all the sounds of machinery, my father's weakness—Mozart—drifts from his workshop in a soothing contrast to the whirring of his electric tools and the quite literal grinding of gears.

I make my practiced way past a box of new supplies overflowing with circuit boards, a two-foot tall robot who reaches out to shake my hand, and a giant clock in the middle of the hallway.

Behind his opened door, my father sits at a worn mahogany desk. His foot taps in tune to the music, but his back is hunched over his work. A pair of pliers rest in one hand and a drill in the other. There's a hammer in his mouth. His long hair—streaks of white through muddy brown—is tied up in a bun, and his smock is drenched in grease. When he sees me in the sheet-metal reflection, he drops all three tools at once. They clatter onto the dusty desk top as he spins his chair around and treats me to a face-splitting grin.

"Isaac, you're here! Good." He claps his hands together and ushers me closer to his futuristic desk. As I approach, he ruffles my hair and says, "My little man. All grown up today. Come, look at this."

Unlike Mr. Skylar's workshop, where every invention was calculated, drawn out and planned, my father's workshop looks like what I imagine his brain to be: chaotic, exciting, haphazard in the best of ways. No one looks happier than my dad does when he's working, not even Apollo.

I sit down at the extra seat beside him, the one he always leaves out just for me. As I scoot in, my dad reveals a metal man about five inches tall and human-shaped, bent in at every joint like the wooden dolls artists use to draw bodies. This one is made entirely of chrome. When



he releases the man's waist, it walks across the desk itself, tiny feet marching rhythmically until it reaches the edge. Instead of falling over, it turns around and marches back.

I watch it go—back and forth, back and forth, never falling, never wavering—and turn to my father with wide eyes.

“How does he know when to stop?” I ask. “Why doesn't he fall off the desk?”

His eyes say he's been dying for me to ask. “That's not all he can do. He can sense any change in terrain, so he can climb, jump, step over anything that he encounters. Watch.”

He sets a book in the little man's path, and I watch as chrome joints fold and stretch to climb right over and jump down to the other side. I whistle. While the man continues, taking a jaunt across the whole workshop—down the desk, up the bookshelf, stepping over projects on the floor or vaulting over boxes—my father unravels all his genius.

He gathers a stack of blue-prints from a drawer. “If we put this technology into...” He clears his throat, shuffles past the image of a plane, and stops on one of a car. “Navigation. We can make roads safer, make it impossible for cars to collide with one another. Look.”

I want to see the plane. We'll never be able to afford one, not even a ride in one. One windshield of a Boeing 747-400's cockpit is almost as much as a BMW. But if my dad made his own plane, we could take it out every day and maybe even charge others for the ride.

I don't say that, though. I just nod, lean forward over the car designs, and look interested.

With hands splayed flat against the table, anchoring himself to the physical world, my father shows me his ideas, speaking of mechanics the way some men speak of love. Sensors, depth perception, magnetics, and computer code spill from his lips like music, drowning out the Mozart, until we are both staring at this little man and seeing the future, seeing whole universes in his tiny body: a million 1's and 0's and so many wires crossed just to make first steps possible.

When my father builds, he's a god—a true one, making the world with his hands—and for just a second, my stomach unknots and the clocks on every wall tick faster than my worry. I think *apprentice*, and I think *god-in-training*, think *success*.

By the time the tide drains out, my father's worlds all spilt, I'm slumped back in my apprentice's chair, fiddling with a small metal box I only realize is our new voicemail machine when I press one of a dozen identical buttons and a voice explodes out of invisible speakers.

"Hi Darrell. This is Zachary Skylar. My secretary tells me he's called you a few times and hasn't heard back, so I thought I'd give you a little ring myself. Long time no talk. How's my best former computer engineer doing? Look, I got big business coming up, and I want you on my team. Give me a call and let's see if we can't make a deal that makes you happy. It's about time that my good friend, Checkbook, and you got reacquainted, don't you think?"

The line goes dead just as my father tugs the voicemail box out of my hand. His eye roll could level whole armies.

"Don't worry about that," he says. While my heart does somersaults through my ribcage, my father points back toward the chrome man. "See this? He can pick up small items if they're placed front of him, but if we reconfigure his programming—really design it like a brain—he could begin to understand the concept of retrieving objects. That is, be sent on a quest and accomplish it. I thought maybe he could help you with your homework. Keep you from losing your school work, keep you organized,"

"I don't need any help getting organized." I'm sure every teacher I've ever had would disagree, but like the chrome man, I am working on autopilot, my thoughts too captivated by the voicemail to care about anything as meaningless as my own educational future. When was the

last time sorting homework got anyone a job? When was the last time it taught someone to defy gravity? My wings blueprint has got to be worth more than my literature homework.

My father shakes his head, begins to dictate the complexity of coding and the possibility of creating a robotic assistant—how he’s been making one just for me—but all I can think about is the possibility of bridging the gap between my family and the Skylars. If my dad were to go back to work for Zach, there’s no way in all the great wide cosmos my secret internship could be kept secret. It would be ban over, hands shook, fences mended. It’d mean burgers with Apollo every Friday night and the opportunity of a lifetime: the first pilotless plane and my name stamped on the blue print. Or at least on the coffee receipts.

It would mean the chance to fly.

Or it would mean permanent imprisonment in my room when my dad finds out I’d disobeyed him.

“Dad,” I say quietly. “You need a job.”

My father has one major rule in the house: no lying, and it goes both ways. I’ve known for some time about the dire financial position we’ve come into since he’d lost his last job for mouthing off at the boss (see: honesty). And I remember the lost job before that, and the one before that, and I don’t need to hear it from his mouth to see the proof everywhere. When a summer breeze rocks the house, we feel it not through a window, but through a hole in the wall we’d tried to seal with duct tape.

Skylar Air had been steady pay, but ever since he’d walked away, my father’s been bumped from one temporary position to the next. All around the room are signs of his genius side-by-side with the proof of our status: a bill unpaid, envelope tucked under the lamp, a final

notice taped to the window, the coupons stacked under the *Computer Engineering Today* magazines.

My dad needs the job with Skylar Air more than I do.

I grab our house phone, yet another chrome Hagar design with a holographic type screen and Steampunk aesthetic. I push it into my father's hand. "You have to take the job."

"Isaac, you know how I feel about that man," he begins, just like he always does.

I squeeze his hand and make sure that he grips onto the phone, our life line now more than ever. I do know how my father feels about Mr. Skylar, so I repeat the script word for word: "He's a despicable man who doesn't care at all about those working for him, and he will ruin the world in his attempts to conquer it. You don't trust him, and you never will."

My father's mouth quirks up into a smile then disappears just as quickly, like he doesn't want me to know I have the upper hand, that I'm spelling out his thoughts verbatim. "Then don't trust him," I say. "Help him. Be the inside man that makes his company better."

My father's fingers fiddle with the phone's edge, and then finally he squeezes back. His calloused hands are wet with grease and oil—*the blood of creation* he'd once called it.

"You want me to be the Trojan horse," he says.

The painting flashes before my eyes: the gods hovering above the world, ready to create, to rule. Mr. Skylar might have thought I'd forgotten, but I know how all these stories end, and mortals only win when they stop playing by the gods' rules. "The Trojan horse for good. And I can help. Keep your enemies closer, right?"

My father hums thoughtfully. His eyes scan my face then dart to the window behind my head. The sun has almost set, and streaks of red and orange scatter across the glass pane. It's

beautiful, in the way postcards are meant to be beautiful, but whatever my father is seeing, it's not light.

"Dangerous things happen, Isaac, when you get too close to things you can't control," he says. "Zachary Skylar is a dangerous man, a powerful man. Better men than I have fallen when they reach too high, when they enter places they don't belong."

Like everything else he has said tonight, it's a speech I know by heart. My father's fears are a guard dog that lives inside me, worries pulsing to the beat of my own heart. Maybe it's the fall making me brave, maybe it's that I survived, maybe it's Apollo who taught me to run when I was five years old. But suddenly the dog lays down and takes a nap.

"You're not reaching too high." I pick up the chrome man and place him in the palm of my father's hand. The metal joints get to work and walk toward the edge of my father's fingertips. Then it senses the edge, turns around, and walks toward his wrist and up his arm. "You know just where to stop."

My father lets out a bark of laughter I haven't heard him use since my failed attempt at a self-ironing board last Christmas exploded in both our faces. "When did you get to be so smart?" he asks.

He scoops up the chrome man and whispers, "Sleep." The metal joints fold together, and the walking stops.

I watch my father put the man away in a drawer, see a flash of what looks like metal feathers tucked under a load of papers, and then he closes the drawer and turns the lock.

"Well, I had a very good teacher," I say. "So will you do it?"

“I’ll think about it,” he says. “Come on.” He stands up and claps his hands together. “I believe I promised you dessert for dinner, Birthday Boy. I might have gone a little overboard, but I’ve got all the fixings for a sundae.”

I know a dismissal when I hear one. I stand up, pulling on a grin, and follow him into the kitchen.

But later that night, after he’s ushered me off to bed and I lie reading a helicopter flight manual by the light of my cellphone, I hear him record a memo: “Reminder, call Zachary Skylar tomorrow.”

## Shot Through the Heart

“The gods were all in their places on the golden floor, sitting with Zeus in conclave. Hebe went round with the nectar, and they pledged one another with their golden goblets, while they watched what was going on before Troy. Suddenly Zeus thought he would tease Hera a little, and he said in a mocking tone, drawing her... ‘Shall we make them begin the war again and fight it out? Or shall we make them friends?’”

Homer, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, *The Iliad*

“I don’t want you getting the wrong idea,” my father says two days later as we walk up the cobbled driveway toward the Skylar’s front door. “I’m just going to hear him out. I haven’t agreed to anything.”

I nod, my hands pushed into my pockets to hide their vicious shaking. When Mr. Skylar called us that morning—his booming voice nearly shaking the eggs off my plate—he’d requested to see the both of us and gave no further explanation. My father might be blissfully unaware of why I’m here, but I know: I’m the lamb led to slaughter. I’m the boy who cried independence, caught in the act the very first time I disobeyed orders. When my father finds out I lied, he’ll be devastated, and I’ll be grounded until I’m fifty.

The front door swings open, and a man in a light blue, fitted suit leads us inside. He does not introduce himself, but gestures for us to enter as he speaks into a Bluetooth device. He snaps to the caller, “No, Margret. If he wants to take the time off, no one is stopping him, but there’s nothing in the budget that will cover a full week. Mr. Skylar will never allow it.” He points to the

plexiglass bench and stalks away, yelling into the earpiece as he disappears behind an office door.

“Cheery,” whispers my father. As our eyes meet, his glittering with barely contained mirth, it becomes difficult to keep my laughter at bay. My hands unclench over my phone.

“Ah,” says a voice from down the hall. My father and I turn at the same time to see Mr. Skylar walking toward us, his arms outstretched, his cheeky grin in place, blinding white teeth glittering eerily in the sunlight. If a mannequin had come to life that morning and replaced the famed CEO, there would hardly have been a difference.

“I’m glad you could both make it,” he says. “Boy, do I have a surprise for you both.”

##

Mr. Skylar repeats his speech about changing the world as he walks my father and me through his workshop. Fergus hovers in the corner, his earphones in, but when we pass too close to his desk, I see the dangling end of the cord, and it’s not connected to anything. In a burst of daring, I meet his eyes and wink, glad to feel like the older one for once, the one in charge, the one who knows what he’s doing. Like we’re in on this secret together.

Fergus rolls his eyes and looks away until his father approaches.

I never have been the daring one.

“Won’t you believe it, Son,” says Mr. Skylar, ruffling Fergus’ sparse mop of stringy hair. “Darrell Hagar back in our midst, just like old times. This man is a genius, best engineer of our time.”

He beams at my father for as long as a man like Mr. Skylar can beam at anyone who isn’t his own reflection. He leads the two of us toward a desk at the back where he’s laid out the blueprints of his first pilotless plane. “And he’s going to make this the best work of our time.”



“Zach, you flatter me,” says my father, but he isn’t smiling. I watch him fiddle with something in his pocket, and though I know it’s the paperclip he uses to keep his mind clear and focused, I imagine it’s a knife instead, that at any moment, my father will whip it out and strike Mr. Skylar down.

My own hands tap on the corner of my phone again. One tap to remember where I am, to stop the imminent day dreams where I fly out the window with wings made of paper mâché; one tap so I don’t get lost staring at the designs all around me; one to force the red-haired woman out of my head; one for good luck; one to keep myself awake.

I still yawn.

“Oh, don’t be modest, Darrell.” Zach hooks his thumbs into his belt and leans back on the balls of his feet. “*The Labyrinth* is a work of genius. Five years in operation, and still unbeatable. There’s nothing else like it.”

My father grits his teeth in what I suppose is an attempt at politeness. *The Labyrinth*—a computer system he’d made to protect company files against hackers, attacking them with a virus he’d nicknamed *The Minotaur*—should have been my father’s call to fame, should have been our guarantee to a mansion on the beach.

“I’ve always felt bad about how things well...transpired between our families,” says Mr. Skylar.

I try not to snort out loud. *Transpired* is a nice way of putting it, but if my father’s snarl is anything to go off of, he hasn’t forgotten the real story any more than I have. *Transpired* doesn’t explain how Mr. Skylar tricked my father out of his copyright. *Transpired* doesn’t tell us why Mr. Skylar gets to live in this mansion, making even more money than he had before, and we still can’t pay our electricity bill.

“To make it up to you, I have a little gift.” With the air of Santa Claus pulling a new bike from his bag, Mr. Skylar produces from his desk a little slip of paper. My name is written on one corner, and in the middle are several numbers too small and far away to read. “I’ve put together a sort of...let’s call it scholarship fund. A thousand dollars to Mr. Isaac now. And for every paycheck you make at our company—should you accept the job, Darrell—I will match ten cents to the dollar. If you stick with us through the project—and I hope after—you may be able to send this boy to college after all.”

Zachary Skylar’s hand comes slamming down against my shoulder. His smile says this is a gesture of good will; his thumb digging into my bones says we’ve been trapped.

My father’s mouth falls open. Maybe Mr. Skylar considers it a sign of delighted surprise, or maybe he just knows he’s won. For as he chuckles and says, “So, Darrell, how ‘bout it?” it’s quite clear how this will end. My father can’t say no, but he will hate saying yes.

This is why Mr. Skylar asked me to come: to be a pawn in his game. The buzzing in my fingertips makes me clench my fists, but no one is paying attention to me any longer.

“No hard feelings, right?” Mr. Skylar wears the same unbelievably white grin he always does. I’m not sure anything in the world can faze him.

My father’s jaw goes rigid. He looks at Mr. Skylar, then at me, then fiddles furiously with the paperclip before he says through gritted teeth, “It’s water under the bridge.”

He’s got everything right but the preposition. Only a tsunami hurtling *over* the bridge could sweep away the tension in my father’s jaw.

“I am glad you’re both here. Makes things easier.” Mr. Skylar looks between my father and me. My father’s expression says he would like to know what is made easier by me being here, but luckily Mr. Skylar moves on before he can ask. I suck in a deep breath and follow our

mutual boss to a computer screen the size of a wall. He presses a button on a surprisingly minuscule keyboard and the screen—which had been flipping through a series of generic landscape photographs—turns over to a large graphic in which a minotaur rides behind the wheel of an airplane.

“This is our big project,” says Zach. “Top priority. And top secret too. This doesn’t leave this garage, you hear me?” He laughs, making it unclear whether or not he’s joking, but I file away the thought all the same: *don’t tell anyone about the internship*. As I am still hiding the job from my father and don’t have any friends to go blabbing to, I’ve got to be the least intimidating security threat the Skylars have ever seen.

“Planes are practically automatic as it is,” continues Zach. “A pilot presses a button, and then he sits around for most of the trip. But he’s there. If anything goes wrong, if there’s an issue, he’s ready to fix it. If we eliminate the pilots, we eliminate the backup. That’s where you come in.” He points at my father and then at the logo on the gigantic computer. The drawing is impressive: intense shadowing, bright colors, and strong line work. I try to picture Zach Skylar behind a desk, drawing a mystical creature in an airplane, but even my brain won’t conjure something so unlikely. Did he steal this artist’s design too, or were they lucky enough to sell it to him for the price of a new San Franciscan apartment and only a quarter of their soul?

“A new and even better Minotaur,” says Mr. Skylar. “Protection for a new age. For the automatic age. These planes need to be unstoppable, unhackable, uncrashable. Aware of every obstacle lightyears before it’ll become a problem. Backups on the backups on the backups of the backups. Do you understand me? You’ll be very well compensated, I assure you. And the best part is, you can work at home. Won’t you agree?”

It's still up for debate as far as I'm concerned, but my dad is already moving, taking a seat in front of the gigantic computer and pulling the keyboard toward him like he does this every day. In a whole new meaning of 'make yourself at home,' he rolls up his sleeves, cracks his neck, and begins zooming through the computer files, adding in numbers as quickly as I can think them up. When the typing gets too dizzying to track, he stops, nods, and turns back around to face the rest of us.

"Yes," he says. "I think I can do it."

A grin like the Cheshire cat's oozes across Zach's face. "I was hoping you'd say that."

He claps his hands together and nods toward the staircase. "Enough talk. Dinner awaits. Let's eat. Come along."

##

The Skylars' dining room is exactly what you'd expect if you've ever spent ten seconds with immensely wealthy people. While I'm disappointed to learn that the plates are not, in fact, made of gold, we're still served enough food to feed a small army on a table longer than my whole kitchen back home. Apples on silver platters line every corner, while between them bowls shimmer with just-washed grapes, and cheese platters crowd every plate of bread. My mouth begins to water before the main course—prime rib, scalloped potatoes smothered in cheese, and bacon-crumbled green beans—is even placed on the table.

As Fergus engages my father in conversation, asking about his inventions—how old he'd been when he'd started, his dream designs—Mr. Skylar leans in close and whispers in my ear: "You didn't tell me you hadn't gotten permission to work here."

I flush. The hand holding onto my fork begins to rattle, making the metal clank against the expensive china.

“Oh, lighten up,” Mr. Skylar barks, laughing. I want to beg: *please talk quieter*, but he merely shakes his head at his steak and lowers his voice again, saying, “You’ve already signed the papers. Clever of you. Very clever. And with your father working at home, there will be no awkward conversations around the water cooler, eh? Clever boy. Clever. Well, I could use the help. Anyway, a little rebellion is good for a boy your age.” He winks. It’s as if he thinks me some criminal mastermind. “I’ll expect you here promptly Monday morning.”

I have no choice but to nod.

As a kid, I was obsessed with old fairytales and adventure stories. They always start the same way: with the hero stepping out of their comfort zone, being dragged along on some epic quest. Defying your father is a basic part of the narrative; if you don’t defy his wishes, you never move out of boyhood, and you never meet the princess.

I just never realized how nerve-wracking the call to adventure would be.

As the dinner stretches on, Mr. Skylar and his family poke at their plates, looking bored, while my father and I dig in, one large forkful at a time. I know we must look desperate, know we should slow down to make a good impression, but it tastes too good to believe.

When I finally surface from mouthfuls of cheesy goodness and melt-in-your-mouth potato extravaganza, I notice Mrs. Skylar watching me from across the table. She’s almost exactly as I remember her: pointed features, critical eyes, hair cut into a severe bob that suggests she’s hiding daggers beneath each strand. But the frown lines have grown around her mouth, and her eyes are heavier than I remember, like they carry the weight of ten worlds and have never seen a good night’s rest. Beside her, Fergus eats with vigor until she shoots him a dirty look, and he slows down, picking his food just like his parents.

On Mrs. Skylar's other side sits her and Zach's eldest son, Aaron, looking just as unpleasant as he'd been when he was nine and I'd last seen him poking his head out the window to heckle me as I left. He's fourteen now and going on twenty-one with a careless slouch and a t-shirt that reads: *Let It Burn*. Dark black hair frames harsh, pointed brows, a thin nose, and pursed lips. He stabs his prime rib again and again and again.

My father shifts beside me, and I work my next words through my mind three times before my lips finally comply. "Where are Apollo and Arianna?"

I know immediately that I've asked the wrong question by the way the air is zapped out of the room. Mr. Skylar rubs the back of his neck while Heather Skylar mimics her eldest son and stabs her knife violently into her green beans.

"They're with their mother," says Mr. Skylar. He isn't meeting my eyes, and he certainly isn't looking at his wife.

I stare down at my own mostly eaten meat, feeling the pressure of Mr. Skylar's infidelity like it's my own crime. Beside me, my father studies his cuticles, and for a long, breathless minute, no one speaks. The twins are the elephant in the room, and right now, Heather looks like a hunter.

I'm staring at a painting behind Mr. Skylar's head—a vivid white lightning bolt striking through a lightless sky—when my father brings up the timeline for the Minotaur installation. I hear only half of what he says—something about coding, testing, and marketing—because my mind is all on the painting. The light from the chandelier sends shadows crisscrossing against the landscape, blurring the frame's outline, and making it appear as though the bolt will escape and incinerate all beneath it.

Mr. Skylar is in the direct line of fire.

Apollo and I grew up beneath that painting, ran past it a hundred times in our many games of hide and seek, of tag, of Sneak-Into-The-Kitchens-And-Steal-Lunch-Before-The-Cooks-See-You. When we were seven, I knocked into the wall and sent it careening off its hook. The bottom of the frame cracked when it hit the tile floor, and my heart had beat straight out of my chest until Apollo told the house cleaners that he'd been the one to break it. The chip is still there, but there are new ones too: dents and divots and smudges that I never made because, of course, life in this house has gone on without me.

"Excuse me." I stand up from the table, folding my napkin and placing it on my chair. "I have to use the restroom."

The adults nod to show they've heard me, but they don't stop in their conversation. And why would they? In every syllable, they hold the future of an industry and the safety of thousands of passengers; they don't notice when I walk straight past the bathroom, turn down the hall, and slip out the front door.

The night air is warm, but the breeze ruffles my hair to remind me that the world is still alive and moving, that real things aren't stuck in frames. I breathe out, long and deep, and I'm about to head back inside for the next course (which I heard is sweet potato casserole, my favorite) when, across the street, the glow of a street lamp illuminates a flash of bright red.

The mysterious woman, hair braided down her back this time and with a leather jacket wrapped around her shoulders, slips out a nearby house and checks over both shoulders. Our eyes meet, and she places a single finger to her lips as though to say: *you never saw me*.

The world comes to a screeching, screaming halt.

I barely have time to twitch, heart plummeting into my stomach while my feet refuse to move. And then she turns down an alley and disappears beyond darkened houses, light posts, and the shadows of the night.

The five taps on my phone aren't nearly enough to calm me now.

My feet feel like they've sunken through the earth, like the front steps of the Skylar mansion have suddenly turned to quicksand. My eyes are locked on the alleyway, and though I can no longer see the woman, and for all I know, she might have evaporated into thin air and popped up in Canada by now, I feel her eyes on me as if they're a part of the night itself, as if she's locked into every cloud, every glimmer of the moonlight.

"We have to stop meeting like this."

A singsong male voice freight-trains its way through my inner turmoil. I blink, and the world comes back into focus. A car has pulled up to the driveway without my realizing it was there, the chariot that releases the prince: Apollo steps out of the back side-by-side with his twin sister.

I have seen Arianna Skylar tower an inch or so over her brother barefoot, but in platform boots, she's nearly a head above him, and almost two above me. She walks past with only a grin to acknowledge my presence; but if she's anything like I remember, this might as well be a hug. In the moonlight, the several silver rings on each of her fingers glitter blindingly as she waves goodbye to her mother.

The car backs up out of the driveway and eases down the street. Apollo waves with all the energy of a marathon runner. Then his eyes—blazing even in the darkness—zoom in on me once more. "What are you doing here?" he asks.



My tongue is still trying to remember the words while a notice board in my brain reads *Danger! Danger! Danger!* in flashing red lights. “What are *you* doing here? Your dad said...”

“Mom got called back to the hospital,” says Apollo. His mother is a surgeon and one of the best in the state, perhaps even the whole country, which I suppose leaves little time for Family Game Night. But there is nothing in Apollo’s face that says ‘I wish my mother worked less and paid more attention to me.’ Instead, pride swells through his chest and creates a 100-watt smile.

“Apparently we’re not allowed to stay home alone,” says Arianna. She’s fiddling with the strap of a long suede bag which is covered in patches that say things like *End the Patriarchy* and *Running with the Wolves*.

“If you’re here, it means *that...*” She shoves a long finger toward the front window, where behind it, orange lights illuminate a hallway I know leads to the dining room. “Is a work dinner. Dad will *love* us interrupting that.”

“It’s just Isaac.” Apollo winks in my direction then struts into the house without a single backwards glance.

Arianna mumbles something to herself that sounds vaguely like ‘*Heather is going to throw a fit*’ as she follows.

My cheeks are blazing as I stand, re-gathering feeling in my feet and breath in my lungs, staring out at an empty street and a darkened alleyway. I squeeze my eyes shut, but Apollo’s voice is telling me to come inside, Arianna echoing, “Come on, you’re letting out all the cool air;” and the images behind my eyelids of eerie red and rising oceans change to a steady, solid yellow. Sunlight on a cloudless day.

I turn away from the alley and follow them inside.

##

In the doorway to the dining hall, Apollo waves to his father and step-family with double the enthusiasm of his sister.

“It’s great to see you again, Mr. Hagar,” Arianna says politely, and Apollo, perhaps remembering the last time he’d seen my father as vividly as I am, meets his eyes with the bravery of a gladiator.

“We’ll sure be lucky to have you around again, Mr. Hagar,” he says.

Mr. Skylar laughs. “Now, don’t be presumptuous, Boy. Darrell still needs to sign the contract.” He winks across the table, but my father’s smile remains as stiff as ever. I notice he’s cut his meat into even smaller pieces than they’d been before I’d left.

“Well don’t let us interrupt,” says Arianna. She turns on her heels to go.

“You all catch up. We’ll steal Isaac. Keep him busy for you.” Apollo’s grin is coming back now, and by the time he’s grabbed my elbow, steered me away from the dinner, and dragged me toward the mansion’s back yard, it’s gone full avalanche of happy.

We step through a sliding glass door and onto a patio that looks more like a public park than a family’s yard. There’s a bonafide playground in one corner—slide, two swings, and a sand box to boot—and beyond it, a wrought iron safety gate surrounds a shimmering aqua swimming pool. I wish I could be surprised, but walking back into this lifestyle—into the glitz and the glamor and the excess of the Skylars—is like walking back into a dream: I know how it ends, but still, I always go along for the ride.

The twins flip on the porch lights, and more follow after them: a ripple effect as electric lanterns begin to glow in every direction. They illuminate, beyond the pool, grass and trees that seem to stretch on forever.

“My turn first,” says Arianna.

Before I can ask what the turn is for, she tosses down her giant bag—almost as long as she is tall—and whips out several fiberglass arrows and a sleek black bow. I’ve never seen one up close before: thin and curved. In her hands, it looks as powerful as a gun. She checks an arrow’s tip then lines it up.

She holds the bow in her left hand, shoulder pointed outward while she grasps the arrow and string in her right. Her back is straight and flexed. Her knuckles touch her cheek. I don’t have time to find what she’s aiming for because suddenly the arrow whizzes out of the bow like a rocket. Apollo and I watch its movements, and I gasp when, on the other side of the yard, it hits a shadowy target dead center.

Apollo grins. “That was an easy shot. It was a wide target.”

He walks to the edge of the back porch and riffles through a wooden chest that would have been more at home in a pirate film. Rather than reveal buried treasure, however, he whips out a much larger, much bulkier silver bow, fit with neon yellow strings. When he shoots, his arrow smacks hers in the center. The board wobbles under the weight and then both arrows fall to the ground.

“So what? A monkey could do that. Your bow does most of the work for you,” snaps Arianna. “Take off your stabilizer and maybe then it’ll be a fair competition.”

They bicker louder and louder as they line up their next shots.

I shouldn’t be surprised. I may not have seen this particular skillset before, but I knew the twins when they were too young to even be good at tag. And yet they’d excelled at everything else they tried: playing nearly every instrument, winning nearly every sport

competition, making every team they tried out for. Mr. Skylar would surely have had an aneurysm if he hadn't raised kids to define 'Exceeds Expectations.'

But my jaw falls all the same.

"Oh, Bird Boy, you haven't seen anything yet." Arianna grins.

For what feels like the dozenth time that night, my face heats to a thousand degrees, and I regret—not for the first time, either—ever telling Arianna and Apollo why I climbed a tree for the first and last time back when I was four years old. But I can't have been the only toddler convinced he was a bird, the only kid who'd broken his arm trying to build a nest on the highest branch.

But I guess you really never do outlive your childhood nicknames.

With the moonlight on her face and a bow in her hands, Arianna shines with Apollo's same cheerful glow, and for a moment, I can see that they're twins. She shoots a tree branch well beyond the target, and a storm of leaves shake off it and tumble into a heap.

"You didn't name the target. Doesn't count," says Apollo.

"You know that's what I was aiming for," says Arianna.

"Then call it."

Two pairs of eyes round on me and the twins say in unison, "You're the referee now."

I nod and plop down onto the grass to watch the competition. I have no part in their game, and I know that, but Apollo was right about one thing; it beats dinner and small talk with my dad and Mr. Skylar.

A summer's breeze ripples over my scalp, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and as Apollo and Arianna argue and curse and shoot acorns off of trees—which they have more of than my local park—I can almost forget the woman with the red hair. In those few,

perfect seconds, I am nothing but another teenaged boy, a spectator to summer adventure. I run my fingers through the grass, careful not to tear even a single blade.

“This is boring,” says Arianna. She’s hit the target five times now. Her arrows, tipped with silver, are harder to see than Apollo’s tipped, unsurprisingly, with yellow.

“Apple time?” asks Apollo.

“Apple time,” says Arianna.

“What is Apple Time?” I ask.

With his hands, Apollo crafts an invisible apple on the top of his head and mimes an arrow’s approach. By the flurried motion of his hands and his mouthing, ‘swish,’ I assume the apple has been knocked off. “You know,” he says. “Apple time.”

“Uh, guys...” I have at least ten or twelve immediate worries, but neither twin take the time to listen. Apollo has already jogged across the yard, hand outstretched to catch the apple Arianna tosses him.

“Stay still,” she says.

“I know how this works,” he says, though I’m not sure he does. I haven’t seen him stay still, well, *ever*, and he sure isn’t doing it now; he wiggles out his arms and legs, heaves in a deep breath, then all at once, becomes a statue. “Ready,” he says, and his chest barely wavers from the motion.

Arianna’s back straightens again. She’s begun to pull back her bow when suddenly the back door swings open and my father, flanked by Mr. Skylar and his wife, storm into the yard.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asks Mr. Skylar. “What is this?”

Arianna lowers her bow, and though she never took the shot, the damage is already done. Apollo can’t remove the apple from his head fast enough. Though the prospect of having a very

sharp, very fast arrow shot at his face had not scared him, my father's crinkled expression—the vein pulsating in his forehead—certainly has.

Apollo jogs back toward the house, saying, “Mr. Hagar, it wasn't, we weren't—” but my father won't hear it. His fingers wrap around my shoulder, tight and demanding, just as they'd always been, like we're kids again, five and getting in trouble for being on the roof, twelve and in trouble for flying in Mr. Skylar's plane.

My father pushes me toward the sliding glass door.

I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. I look between Apollo, his sister, and my father, and then to the Skylars, who are still standing inside, looking simultaneously disappointed in Mr. Skylar's children and thoroughly unsurprised. Heather, for her part, with her nose in the air and her arms crossed over her chest, seems to embody *I Told You So* with every fiber of her being. But what she told—that her biological kids were better than her step-kids, or that I couldn't be trusted, that I was somehow a bad influence—I can't be sure.

“Any one of you could have been killed,” barks my father. He's steering me back inside, and when I try to look over my shoulder—try to see Apollo's expression as Mr. Skylar marches out into the yard and berates him for being senseless; try to read Arianna's mind as her father turns his anger on her—it's no use. My father is walking too fast and his grip is too strong, and before I know it, we're zooming past the well-lit dining hall, past the hallway with the deified painting, barreling for the front door.

My father yanks it open when suddenly Mr. Skylar catches up with us. He comes to a stop, straightens his tie, and throws on his best toothy smile before he speaks. “Kids will be kids, huh?” he says. “Teenagers. What are you going to do?” When my father refuses to match his cheeky grin, he presses on, “I hope this won't impact our negotiations.”

My father shakes his head. “I’ll see you on Monday morning, Mr. Skylar.” His voice is sharp, but so polite and formal, I’m sure I’m the only one who reads the danger behind it.

“Goodnight.”

He spins on his heels, and I follow. As I slid into the passenger seat of our beat up Volkswagen Scirocco and watch him roll over the engine three times, I play out his next words in my head a second before I hear them. My father is nothing if not consistence with his speeches.

“That was very irresponsible. You could have been hurt, and I know you know better. I didn’t raise you to be so reckless. I don’t want you seeing that family again, do you hear me? I shouldn’t have even brought you here tonight.” The anger is gone from his voice now. My father has never been very good at staying angry for long, not at me, not when we’re alone. Like a guard dog, he knows how to put on a good show in front of perceived threats, but he rolls over the second a friendly face comes into sight. And for as long as I can remember, my father and I have been each other’s only friendly faces in the world.

“Dad. I wasn’t anywhere near the arrows! And they—” I’m cut off by a firm shake of his head.

“No, Isaac. I mean it this time. You’re not to hang around with the Skylar family, do you hear me?” The car starts, finally, and we speed off down the road. The farther we get, the rougher the asphalt becomes, and my father, seatbelt on tight, has eyes for nothing but what’s in front of him. “You were right. It’s a good job and a good opportunity. And I’ll take it. For us. For our future. But I don’t trust that man, and I don’t trust his family. I don’t want you seeing them again.”

My heart goes thud, thud, thud—then nothing.

When I was six, my father told me the human heart was a balloon, and that's why you felt like floating when you were happy and sinking when you were sad. If that's true, he's now pushed a needle into mine, and as all the air rushes out and it shriveles into an empty, useless husk, I sink back into my seat and stared out the window. Square house after square house whizz by, lights on in every window, so I can imagine all the happy families—mothers and fathers and siblings, friends coming over for dinner.

“I don't want you going around with those twins anymore,” says my father. “They're dangerous.” He turns up the radio, and we sit in silence while an old rock-and-roll song screeches, ironically, about forgiveness.



## 4

### Sky Vision

“But Zeus seems like an incarnation of Jehovah or Brahman, god as grumpy old daddy,  
with the keys to the car and the worst job in the world, which is running the world,  
though most people were probably a lot easier to scare in 400 B.C.”

Barbary Hamby, “Olympia,” *Bird Odyssey*

That night, I dream I’m in a tower prison, shaking at the bars of my cage. Then the metal holding me back dissolves, and I tumble out the window, faster, faster, crashing toward the ocean—only to fall straight into the pilot’s seat of a literal-paper airplane. When I reach for the controls, nothing happens because, well, it’s *paper* and the rain-drops fall so hard on this 8 x 10 card stock, it actually starts to disintegrate. I’m crashing, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

Then just before I touch the water, I wake up safe in my bed, drooling on my flight manual and wearing a copy of the Skylar Air blueprints like a blanket.

The sky out the window is still black and starless, so when I move the curtain aside, gasping for air and searching for some sign of light—for something, anything real—I see only my own reflection staring back at me, illuminated by the moonlight. I appear like a ghost: pale and shaken and quivering on the glass, not quite complete, not quite whole. A crack in the window breaks my reflection into section eight’s, a preview of what I’d look like had I hit the water, if I never woke up, if a magical red-haired woman never broke my fall.

I lay back down, curling into my blanket and staring at the ceiling until the light shines in: purple, then orange, then white. It illuminates the messy contents of my room until they no

longer look like hulking monsters in the darkness. My desk comes into focus: cluttered in drawings and old, graded homework stacked high and rattling in the ever-present breeze. On the shelf above sits my two engineering trophies—first place—and the model robot my father and I built together when I was seven. There’s a photograph pinned to the wall of me and Wall-E at Disneyland, and an Iron Man collectible doll still in the package. From my bed, he looks like he’s flying over the room.

The whirl of the coffee machine and the clattering of pans downstairs tells me my father’s awake, but I don’t move. I can’t. I’m pretty sure I’m glued to the bed, my legs as heavy as the frying pans he’ll be taking out to make us both eggs and bacon. It feels like someone’s fried *me*.

*One of you could have been killed.*

I roll onto my side and watch through the window as two kids chase after a cat, laughing.

*I don’t want you going around with those twins anymore. They’re dangerous.*

I reach toward my desk and exchange the flight manual for my sketchpad. It’s old and worn, the black leather missing in the corners where my fingers have held on too tight to the cover. I flip the pages until I find an unfinished sketch of a Skylar airplane I’d started the night I got the internship. Without a spot for the pilot, the spot I always imagined I’d sit in, I’d had no choice but to place myself in the back with the rest of the passengers: a crowd of excited stick figures I’d drawn cheering, complete with thought bubbles above their heads reading things like: “*The future is great!*” and “*Wow, I’m so glad this plane is safe and crash proof*” and “*We never fall!*” Graphite stains my fingertips as I trace the sleek outline, the long wings. It’s the second to last page of my sketchbook, and for the first time, as I sit alone, listening to my dad hum along to the Sunday morning radio, I wonder if I’ve wasted it.

The airplane stares up at me, the grins of the stick figures beginning to resemble demented clowns rather than ecstatic voyagers. When my mother gave me this sketch book, she'd smiled a bit like that—wide and lopsided, her head tilted to one side, staring at me with eyes so alive and passionate they could melt metal off the airplane's frame.

Now I smear the smiles off the charcoal face and look out the window, squinting at the place on the driveway where her car used to sit. When I let my imagination get ahead of me, it plays out a scene of that day: the sun rising higher and higher above the horizon as I sprinted after her car and my dad called after me in a choked voice, "She's gone, Isaac. She's gone. Let her go." He cried into my shoulder every day for a week, didn't let me out of his sight once.

I flip the book back three pages. A tree—this one I've drawn a face on too—smirks out from the bleached pages. Thin wobbly branches, dozens of them, wrap around its body like a dancer caught in mid-spin. It's the perfect place to fall from—grabbing one branch after another, tumbling down, leaves scratching your face from every inch down you go. My father blew a gasket the day I'd fallen at the park, broke my arm, and sat, staring at him, holding the splintered pieces of my bones together without crying at all.

*They're dangerous.*

I stand up and grab a photo album off my highest shelf, flipping through it until I find what I'm looking for: a picture of my dad and me in the hospital room. I'm barely bigger than my cast, drowning in it, but I'm grinning up at the camera, proud of the signatures I've already received (all from the nurses) and unaware of my father's grim expression. I've never bothered to look at the picture before—I remembered the pain well enough—but now I stare at my father: grim, dire, overprotective. Sure I'm going to leave him too. But it's not my dad that makes the picture so shocking; it's not his grimace that catches my eyes.

It's what's behind him.

There's a single nurse fixing the pillows on my bed; a few feet back, a woman stands in the doorway, frozen, as though caught unwillingly in the camera's light. Her bright red hair stands out vividly amongst the white and blue hospital decorations, and though the picture is nearly fourteen years old, she's not a second younger than when I'd seen her two days ago.

There is lead in my veins now, a weight pressing down on my heart, on my lungs, a feeling like getting run over by a monster truck. I flip the page, scan over a report card immortalizing my first B amongst a sea of C's, flip past pictures of every first day of school and every last one—photographs my dad always insisted on, always mumbling about “having to remember it all”—past a picture of me grinning side by side my first robotics project, the certificate I'd gotten for excelling at my engineering after-school club. But no matter how far in the book I get, pictures of me that get older and older, I can't find a single repeat of the woman.

And there are no pictures of Apollo at all.

How had I grown up with him, played with him every summer, gotten lost in the woods with him, climbed trees with him, fought robots with him (both of my creation), but never taken a single picture to confirm it? And where was the photograph—like the one in Mr. Skylar's hall—of the three of us: Apollo, his father, and me in the helicopter? It was the last picture I'd ever taken with him.

I reach under my bed and grab all the blueprints I'd hidden there, flip to the one I'd submitted for the internship, and grab hold of the abandoned charcoal. As I get to drawing in my sketchbook—finishing a wing, detailing the tail—the blueprints sit beside me, a warm reminder of the adventure I'd planned to start this summer, but I don't need to look at the papers; I have them memorized, know everything about Mr. Skylar's plan—everything except my part in it.

Within seconds, the picture is done: an airplane ready to take to the skies, and beside it, an image I've only ever seen in my dreams: stick-figure me, grinning, sitting at the controls of a helicopter.

Without thinking, because if I do, I know I won't make it out the door, I shove the sketchbook and the blueprints into my backpack and toss it all over my shoulder. I'm already in the hallway, reaching for the front door, when I gather up the courage to speak. "Dad, I'm going to the park to do homework! I'll see you later!"

His voice drifts out from the kitchen, a steady, comforting tone against the hissing of the stove and the dire reports of the morning news. "Oh, alright then. Don't stay out long," he says. "And be safe!"

It's a word I've heard so many times that it's lost all meaning. *Safe. Safe. Safe.* What will it sound like when I'm on my own, when, for the first time, the places my father thinks I am and the things he thinks I'm doing are different than the truth? But in 1986, the plane *Voyager*, flew all the way around the world without landing or refueling, and there was nothing safe about that. I bet they didn't even ask their dads for permission. I can't be a pilot playing it safe. Bessie wouldn't have.

I catch the bus just in time. After shooting a quick "We keep meeting," to the bus driver—who doesn't laugh—I settle down on a rickety, broken seat, pieces of it tugged out, and fluff leaking out of the cushion. I convince myself that a summer internship is the same thing as summer homework. At sixteen, I'm doing both of us a favor: followers don't make good men, don't grow up to be leaders. Hadn't a teacher said that to me once?

I stare out the window, and with every building that passes, each bigger and bigger than the last, I invent my new mantra: by forging my own path and by bringing home two paychecks,

his and mine, I'll make our family proud. My father's whispered words the day after my mother left—*it's just you and me now, Buddy; we have to stick together*—were leading me to this moment: making the hard decisions so we'd both survive.

If only I could convince him of that.

##

The doorman—or maybe he's a secretary—isn't expecting me. He doesn't say this, of course; he's too polite, with his plastered grin, as crafted as my charcoal men. But his eyebrows rise a fraction of a centimeter, and I catch sight of a wrinkle on his dress pants. He smooths this out, as if he's seen me staring, and clears his throat. "Come in, Young Hagar. I'm Mr. Driscoll. It's lovely to meet you."

The greeting makes me feel like I'm in a medieval drama, though I'm not yet sure if I'm the young prince on his way to destiny, or the criminal headed for the dungeons. I don't mention that we've met before. I've always been taught not to correct adults. Hesitating between a bow and a beeline through the doorway, I stumble into a sort of half-knee bend before Mr. Driscoll instructs me to wait on a plexiglass bench the size of a baseball dugout. Determined to stay awake this time, I sit and rub sleep out of my eyes, yawn, and refuse to look at the gods' painting. Instead, I scrub at the hem of my t-shirt and find an orange-juice stain shaped like Sonoma Mountain.

I am definitely headed for the dungeons.

Mr. Driscoll is only gone for a minute or so—enough time for me to start rubbing the orange out with my own spit—when Heather walks into the room. She catches sight of me with my thumb halfway in my mouth and arches a perfectly manicured eyebrow.

“Hello,” she says. “You didn’t have a meeting today, did you? I did think I requested such things to be done at the office, but why should anyone listen to me?” Her smile is plastered, murderous.

I shake my head. “No, Ma’am. I needed to speak with Mr. Skylar. About my internship.”

She hums thoughtfully, and then she walks away. There is no goodbye, no further explanation, no ‘see you later.’ Her nude heels clip-clap across the wooden floor, and when she enters a room off to the right, the door slams closed behind her.

The house is silent. And horrible. I can hear my heart beating in my chest, can hear my own breathing, can hear every creak of the upstairs—which I didn’t even know was possible in a house this big and wealthy and well-kept.

And then a voice rises from down the hall, a man’s voice I’ve never heard before. “We’ve gone over this, Zachary.” The tone is clipped and sharp, as though he’s repeated the same words again and again and has grown tired of the strain.

“Yes, Milos, and we’ll continue to go over it until I’m satisfied that we agree. Now, I would appreciate if you would keep your voice down.” Mr. Skylar sounds as tired as this Milos person, but his words lack the emotion. He is, as always, a man in control. Though I can’t see him from the other side of the door, I imagine him standing tall with his hands on his hips, staring down his nose at the other man while he strokes his goatee and counts his money.

Milos—whoever he is—must have listened, because all that comes from under the door next are muffled whispers. I can’t make out a single word. A moment later, the door opens and a man with dirty blonde hair and small, beady brown eyes steps out wearing a three-piece suit and an ugly, crinkled expression.

They shake hands, and then the man's eyes roam the room and land on me. A shock, like I've put a fork in the toaster again, vibrates through every part of my body. I'm sure I'm seeing him for the first time, but he's so familiar, I think I could close my eyes and still remember every detail of his face. I search my memory for a Milos—an old teacher, maybe, or a gym coach—but the archives of my mind come up blank.

Milos marches out the front door and Mr. Skylar turns to me, exasperated smile turning to one of great surprise and excitement. I want to ask what happened, but luckily Mr. Skylar stops my curious cat problem by steamrolling over me before I put my foot in my mouth.

"Isaac, it's good to see you," he says, and I begin to stutter out a "You too, Sir" just as Mrs. Skylar reenters the room.

"Aaron needs help with his summer homework," she says. "He's still struggling, Zach. He needs his father."

Mr. Skylar waves her concern away with one of his large, ring-covered fingers. "He's fourteen, Heather. If he can't work on his own by now, we haven't been raising him right. Plus, a boy's got to fail a few times to figure out how to pick himself back up."

My eyes go wide. It's the last thing on Earth my dad would have said. If it was up to him, I'd walk around every day in a suit made of bubble-wrap and a bullet-proof helmet.

While his wife splutters about how young fourteen truly is and how very few times Mr. Skylar has ever helped his middle son, Mr. Skylar throws an arm around my shoulder and begins to lead me out of the room and back toward the garage. "Don't mind her," he says. I look back over my shoulder to see Heather with her arms crossed over her chest, her cheeks stained pink, but Mr. Skylar doesn't seem to have noticed. It's like he's on cloud nine, this guy—not a care in the world.



“I’ll tell you, don’t get married unless you want someone on your case night and day,” he says. “You escape your parents, and next thing you know, you’re answering to your wife.” His laugh is a boom of thunder so loud, I worry for the glass walls all around. I wonder how this man of excess hasn’t broken them already.

“I think, Sir, if I loved somebody, I’d want to make them happy. Sir.” The title spills out of my mouth as a lame afterthought, and it doesn’t make Mr. Skylar’s raised eyebrows lower any. He says nothing and leads me onward.

Down in the garage, Fergus stands, like always, balanced between his flesh-and-blood leg and the metal workbench. He’s got safety goggles on and his tongue is between his lips as he concentrates on welding together what looks like two tiny model wings. He doesn’t look up when we enter. Not that I expected him to.

“Mr. Skylar,” I say, turning away from the temptations of the workshop and meeting my would-be-boss face to face. “What you said at dinner—I needed to...well I wanted to...” My feet shuffle across the hard floor, and I cough, clear my throat, and try again. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. “I wanted to make sure I still have a job.”

Mr. Skylar laughs. “I told you I’d see you Monday morning, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but—”

“You thought I’d change my mind after I saw how angry your father was last night,” Mr. Skylar finishes for me.

I nod.

Mr. Skylar continues, “You think I won’t want to take that sort of risk, keeping you around when it might upset him.”

I nod again.

Zach strokes his beard, his smile slight. “Oh, but don’t you know, Son—the risk is what makes it fun.” He claps my shoulder. “But if this is to stay between us, I have to ask: why do you want to be a part of this project so badly? Shouldn’t a boy your age be out playing football and getting into trouble with some pretty girls?” The twinkle in his eyes should be exciting, this moment a teenager’s dream—telling secrets with a powerful creator, a mentor who is about to take me under his wing—but I have difficulty looking him in the eye.

“I think I need to do this,” I say with my cheeks burning. I want to tell him I’ve been dreaming about this all my life, but it sounds too cheesy even for me. “I want to try. I want to help.”

Mr. Skylar’s grin only intensifies. “And you’d disobey your own father to keep this job?”

“It’s the closest I’ll ever get to the sky.” I’m not sure what makes me say it and why I haven’t said something more intelligent. I could have pointed him to the collection of aviation magazines under my bed or engineering encyclopedias on my home-made shelves. I could have told him I wanted to be an inventor like my father, that this is my only chance to learn. But no more words come out. I gulp and stare up at the man who holds my fate in his hands and wait for the judgment to fall.

His eyebrows have darted up into his hair. “Come on,” he says after a long, pregnant pause. “I have something I want to show you.”

A barren belt of brown grass and sun-blazed pavement make up the Skylar airstrip. By the time we arrive, the place is packed. We crisscross paths with men and women in orange vests and black trollies holding mountains of luggage. The buzz of activity is deafening.

“This way,” booms Mr. Skylar over the shouting men and the roar of a plane engine. He waves a hand over his head and leads me toward a single black helicopter on the far side of the road. Emblazoned on its left side is the Skylar logo: a runway strip twisted into an S with a plane zooming upward out of the top curve. The neat cursive letters beneath it that spell out the company name—*his* name—have been recently repainted in their trademark blue.

My vision seems to have blurred, to spin around me, every detail coming up out of an endless haze. I pinch my arm, but I don’t wake up this time. It’s the helicopter from my dream, and it’s not fading away.

“You’re going to need this,” says Mr. Skylar, reaching into the front seat to grab two helmets; he thrusts one into my hands. “Get on in. Go ahead.”

I put it on as I clamber into the passenger seat, flipping down the visor and adjust the headphones. It’s just like I remember, like pressing rewind on my trip four years ago, only this time Apollo isn’t there by my side to whoop in glee and excitement, and there’s no chance of my father tracking me down and ending the fun. With the helmet on, the world rushes into focus, nothing but me and the metal cocoon around us, the prospect of the sky up above.

Then Mr. Skylar nudges me behind the controls. “You think I’m taking you out for a sightseeing trip?” he asks, taking the seat beside me, a passenger now to this next great adventure. “No, Son. You want to fly? Let’s fly.”

There goes my heart again, cartwheeling through my chest so fast it takes my brain a few seconds to catch up.

“Me? You want me to fly?”

“Did I stutter?” Mr. Skylar laughs. He wastes no time, placing one large hand over mine and leading me grab the lever and the throttle. I’m breathing so hard and my mind racing so fast,

that I have to ask him to repeat everything while I struggle not to have a heart attack right then and there.

“The cyclic, Son. This is the cyclic.” He points to a device directly in front of my seat.

“The tail rotor is controlled by the two petals on the floor right here. You feel that? Can you reach okay?”

I nod.

“To go up, you lift up on the collective. To go down, you lower the collective. Now as we go up, you’re going to need to increase the engine speed.” The instructions don’t stop there. There’s so much to do—different places to put my left hand than my right, petals to keep my feet busy, and controls to make my mind spin—and though I’ve read it all before in my books, memorized it even, I’m glued onto every word Mr. Skylar says, absorbing it all with rapt attention.

When it’s time to go and Mr. Skylar is waiting expectantly and bile is rising slowly from my stomach to my throat, I stare out at the landing strip. It has gone quiet and still. The skies are empty. And waiting.

Nodding slowly, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, I lift up on the collective. My stomach lurches as the helicopter rises into the air. It’s a bit like my driving lessons at school, but instead of the engine purring under my feet, the heat of metal drifting down a busy road, there’s a sense like I’ve risen up the highest arch in a wonderful roller coaster. No amount of metal around me, no amount of whirring blades or seatbelts or helmets, can stop the weightless feeling in my chest, like I’m drifting away on a balloon, like every good thing I’ve ever wanted, every good dream I’ve ever had, is about to come true.

Everything is on the horizon and I—lifting the plane higher and higher—am flying straight over it.

I can't feel my fingers, only the metal beneath them. There's no me. There's just the controls.

"A bit higher," says Mr. Skylar, shouting now to be heard. Wind whips his hair past his face, and up here—so far from the world and his office—he looks much younger, so much friendlier. Soon, I'm smiling back.

Like Apollo would have, I let out a whoop of laughter that fills the helicopter, a joy I can feel vibrating through my fingertips and making me grin until my jaw is aching. I don't have to tap anything. Not even the controls. I know exactly where I am.

There is nothing around us but sky, blue as far as they eye can see. And I'm at home.

"A bit higher," says Mr. Skylar again, and I go higher. "Higher!" he yells. I go higher still.

I'm going to touch the sky, I'm sure of it. Beneath us, the city stretches out for miles: houses no bigger than the tip of a needle, a hundred thousand dots in a sea of green and gray. From up here, the whole world might as well have been a picture: a flat 2-D cut-out, a drawing of what some alien designer thought the city should be. The world is just a map, but Mr. Skylar and I are gods, real and bigger than life, so far away from the rest. So much better, so much realer than a painting.

Then Mr. Skylar touches my hand, pushing the collective down. "Steady," he says. "Not too high."

We fly only a single circle around the airstrip before Mr. Skylar checks his watch and mumbles something about a meeting. "Business calls, Son. You'll learn this soon enough." He

helps me to land the plane, and though it isn't a smooth ride—we hit hard, the vibrations of the earth radiating through the landing skids, through our seats, making even my bones rattle—we are safe and whole and back on solid ground.

The city comes back into focus, appearing like water out of a mirage, foggy around the edges and then clear as day: the same men in the same vests, the same empty planes, the same concrete oasis.

I hand my helmet to Mr. Skylar as I jump out of the helicopter. I feel like I've gained a thousand pounds, and every step back to the car takes a lifetime. I am a man returning from the moon, stumbling under the weight of all this gravity, so by the time we reach the car, I hardly remember to be impressed. Air-conditioned leather seats, sleek red convertible, every inch of it glowing with money signs, and I'm still wishing to be back in a trembling helicopter, miles above.

"If you work hard, I just might be inclined to give you front row VIP entrance to the first launch," says Mr. Skylar.

We both slide into the car, and he starts the engine. "Once in a lifetime opportunity, you know. Seeing the first pilotless plane in action, and you'll be front and center. Might even get your picture in the paper with me." He winks. Then his voice drops as he says with fatherly gentleness, "I'll need you to keep an eye on your father, you understand? Nothing bad, nothing bad." He waves away what must be a look of shock flashing across my face. "But, well, we don't want things to end like they did before, do we? Just make sure he keeps working, that's all. Can you do that for me?"

It's for his own good. It's for our future.

My stomach does something close to a backflip, and I nod, dumbly, before my lips remember how to work. “I will,” I say. “I promise.”

Mr. Skylar reaches out to squeeze my arm, and though I know it’s just a friendly gesture of comradery and support—something my dad might have done had he been proud of my dreams and not terrified of them—the second Mr. Skylar’s fingers touch my bare arm, everything inside me jolts like I’ve just swallowed a battery. My throat is dry, my tongue too heavy in my mouth, and the tingling spreads, down my arm and through my hands, buzzing at my fingertips and making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

And then the world shifts.

One second, I’m sitting in the passenger seat of Mr. Skylar’s car, and the next, I’m standing in the doorway of a Wall Street office, watching Mr. Skylar, in a 1920’s pinstriped suit, answer a corded telephone, yelling at a secretary to bring him coffee.

Then the image changes. Mr. Skylar remains, but the world shifts around him. The office is replaced with a battlefield. Mr. Skylar is dressed as a general and is yelling for men to follow him into war as the North and South collide over the fate of the United States.

Flash. Tilt. The world turns over. A medieval castle appears on the horizon and zooms closer in. Mr. Skylar, now dressed in purple silks, sits in a throne twice his size as a bolt of lightening illuminates the sky out the window. It shocks the breath from my lungs, and as I gasp, I come back to the car and find Mr. Skylar—the real one, the one dressed in his normal suit, with no abnormal powers—his face stricken and staring at me with piercing blue eyes. One last bolt of light flushes through his irises and then all is normal.

Mr. Skylar stares around the perfectly empty car, out the window toward the perfectly normal airstrip—no castles, no battlefields, and no lightning.

“You alright, kiddo?” he says. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”



## 5

### An Early Retirement

They are like those crazy women  
who tore Orpheus  
when he refused to sing,  
these men grinding  
in the strobe & black lights  
of Pegasus. All shadow & sound.  
“I’m just here for the music,”  
I tell the man who asks me  
to the floor. But I have held  
a boy on my back before.”

Terrance Hayes, *At Pegasus*

My hands won’t stop twitching. The car moves at a snail’s pace, idling down the freeway and back toward the Skylar mansion, so slow I’ve convinced myself I can see the facial expressions on every passing driver out the window. Mr. Skylar is stepping on the gas, silent, and though the speedometer reads sixty MPH, I don’t believe it. Even my pulse is in slow motion as I tell myself on repeat: *it was just your imagination, it was just your imagination*. But when had I gotten so creative?

Maybe Apollo was right. Maybe I have a concussion. Telling myself this—believing that it’s medical, that it’ll be fixed with some bed rest and limited mental strain and a nurse without red hair—makes my hands stop shaking some, but I still sit on my palms to hide the evidence of

my total freak-out from Mr. Skylar. I don't want him to think I'm crazy any more than I wanted his son to, but for different reasons: Zachary Skylar probably doesn't hire crazy people to work at his bigger-than-life factory, inventing out-of-this-world machinery.

To be a pilot, you have to have 20/20 vision, with or without glasses, but I have no idea what your brain is supposed to look like. I tap my phone: one tap to remind myself I'm in the car, not floating in the clouds; one tap to remember my first grade teacher who said my over-active imagination was perfectly normal for a 'healthy young boy my age;' one tap because the red-haired woman works in the ER—I think—and not the psych ward; one for the clouds outside, wiping out the bright blue skies where gods rest; one, always, for good luck.

The second we pull into the driveway, I thank Mr. Skylar and burst out the passenger door, hurrying into the entryway to grab my things. I sling my backpack over one shoulder, letting my heartbeat rest to the comforting notion that my sketchbook is still inside—at least something is normal, at least something makes sense. If a few hastily done drawings are the best I have to hold onto reality, I'm in trouble, but I don't want to think about that now.

I'm about to step outside, ready to make a run for my home and maybe get some sleep, thinking maybe I'll wake up refreshed and without any more hallucinations, when Apollo appears at the top of the staircase. We make eye contact, he grins, and then he jogs the rest of the way down the steps.

His hair is pulled up today, and he's dressed in a pair of navy scrubs that look at least one size too small. The magic 8-ball rests even in his scrub pockets. He must see me staring because he suddenly looks down at himself, plucks at the thin material, and says, "First day at the hospital. Pretty cool, right? Mom's letting me shadow her." As he reaches the doorway, he adjusts the strap of his backpack. It's filled to the brim with what must be heavy books—their

corners poking out in every direction. Like the rest of his usual wardrobe, the fabric is bright yellow.

“Are you alright?” Apollo picks up my backpack too and rests it over his other shoulder. We head out the door—I haven’t figured out how to speak yet—and pass by his father, who waves goodbye to the pair of us, already on the phone and looking a thousand miles away as he bickers to someone on the other line about sales figures.

“I can take that.” I reach for my bag, but Apollo shrugs me off and continues walking.

We reach the sidewalk, and he stops, looks me over from head to toe then back again, and says, “You don’t look like you’re okay.”

He places one large hand against my forehead, which does nothing at all to help except make me ten times hotter. “I’m heading to my mom’s right now,” he says. “I was just grabbing some stuff at my dad’s. You want to come? She’s making a stew tonight that can cure anything.”

I have every intention of saying no, of telling him I’ve had my share of adventures and socialization for the day, and that all I need now is a very long nap. But he’s still holding my backpack, and, grinning at me over his shoulder, he walks off down the pavement, humming something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like “You’ve Got a Friend in Me.”

I jog after him.

The walk is pleasant enough. Gray clouds have gathered fully in the sky, promising rain to come; but for now, a weak sun still shines down upon our path.

I almost have to jog to keep up with Apollo’s large strides, but it’s okay. The breeze keeps me from sweating, and we chat idly about school and the years that have passed between us; he shares the absurdity of some private school teachers, and I the strictness of public school. He complains about uniforms; I complain about broken lockers. In what seems like no time at

all, we're slowing onto what must be Apollo's street because he waves to every old man out watering his garden or woman mowing the lawn.

In all our years as friends, I have never been to Apollo's second home. I imagined another sky-scraping mansion, butlers to greet us at the front entry, and a driveway made of gold. So I'm pleasantly surprised when we stop outside a modest single-story suburban home. A bricked walkway leads from the sidewalk up to a wooden front door. We stop here to take off our shoes and leave them beside a brown and green welcome mat.

We are consumed by noise the second we step inside. The front room is filled with girls, all looking around our age, and all wearing matching black jackets and severe expressions. They sit on the couches or else crisscrossed on the floor, nodding along to Arianna's every word as she stands before them, her bow thrown over her shoulder while she passes out flyers.

"That would be the Women's Archery club," whispers Apollo. He nods for me to follow, and we slip into the kitchen where a Black woman in an apron emblazoned with tiny stars stands over a steaming pot. The smell of chicken broth and onions makes me think of the stews my father would make us in the winter, and instantly, my mouth begins to water.

"Hi Mom," says Apollo.

The woman turns around, revealing a face that is nothing at all like Apollo's father. Where Mr. Skylar's smile splinters around the edges, hers falls into the smooth lines of a full moon, and it shines just as bright.

"There you are!" she cries and cups Apollo's face in her hands and kisses him once on the forehead. Up close, the resemblance is uncanny: Arianna's topaz eyes and her son's bouncing, cheerful voice. Her hair, like his, is tightly braided but pulled into a knot at the back of her head.

“And who is this?” She rounds on me, hands going to her hips as she looks me up and down. “You must be the famous Isaac I’ve been hearing so much about.”

Apollo fidgets, and his eyes search mine, as if to say: *moms, huh?*

For the first time, I wish I could I relate. I don’t know what it’s like to have a mother who embarrasses me in front of friends or smothers me with dinners and affection, but I am happy not to be the one under the spotlight for once. I laugh and extend a hand to shake. “Yes, Ma’am. It’s nice to meet you Ms...”

“Ms. Tallie,” says Apollo’s mother, taking my hand in both of hers. Her grip is strong but careful, and it takes little imagination to picture her in an OR, slicing a man open like she’d sliced carrots for the stew.

Apollo takes hold of my elbow and steers me out of the kitchen. As we pass by the living room and disappear into the hall, Arianna shouts something about reparations before her speech is muted by the walls between us.

“Is she the president or something?” I ask.

Apollo laughs. “Yeah, or something. Queen of the school, more like. President of the Women’s Archery Club. The Feminism Club. The Black Student Union.” On his long fingers, he ticks off her many accomplishments.

We reach the end of the hall and step into his bedroom. I remember his room in Mr. Skylar’s house for its elegant furniture and the trophies on the shelves, but this room is different; this room is lived in—an unmade bed fitted with pale blue sheets and a golden blanket; a book, spine down on the desk, a guitar propped up against the wall; and dolphins, dolphins everywhere: dolphin posters and dolphin textbooks, a picture of Apollo swimming with a dolphin in some foreign country in a blue-green ocean.

There are trophies here too, crowding up the walls with awards for track and field, for archery, for music. I step closer and read the engravings on each one. There are no second-place awards.

“Is there anything you’re bad at?” I ask.

Apollo removes his scrub top and exchanges it for a souvenir t-shirt; the white letters surrounding the drawing of a goat, bunny, and chicken, reveal that he’d volunteered at the petting zoo one summer ago. “Math,” he says and sits down on his bed. “Drawing ‘atomically correct’ people according to my art teacher.” He makes air quotes with his hands.

I want to laugh, thinking of my own sketchbook, full of meticulously detailed planet diagrams, scaled to the inch—I checked—and I wonder if I should show them to him, but I never reach into my backpack, and no noise escapes my throat. I skim past the sports trophies, reach out for a framed photograph of Apollo at what looks like an elementary school band recital—a tiny grinning Apollo holding a violin—but I pull my fingers back at the last minute. There is dust lining this picture and all the trophies that surround it, and I don’t dare to be the one who upsets the balance.

Apollo is watching me; I can feel his eyes on the back of my head. I stop at his book shelf, and my fingers scan the many volumes here, textbooks more exciting than I’d ever read in public school, and nicer too. There are no creases on the spines, no gum stuck in the pages, and I bet that if I opened one up, I’d find no crude jokes in the margins.

A book on Ancient History catches my eye, and I reach for it before remembering to ask. “Sorry. Can I look at this one?” The Apollo I used to know never read history books.

Apollo nods, so I take it out and sit down beside him on the bed. He is like a furnace; with only inches between us, I feel the warmth radiating out of him like I’ve stepped into a

sauna. I flip open the book, scan past pyramids and hieroglyphics, images of Greek vases and bowls, and stop on what appears to be a shield. The picture takes up half the page. Carved into the center is a giant lightning bolt.

My heart stops beating.

I don't know how long I stare, can only imagine what I must look like: bug-eyed and frozen because of a simple book, tapping my fingers against my belt buckle again, and again, and again. It's as if I've stepped onto the world's fastest spinning rollercoaster, and everything is tipping, my vision in spirals. Because in that lightning bolt is a memory of a medieval castle on the horizon, of a sea of clouds, of a man in a white toga holding a bolt of lightning high above his head.

Apollo's hand is on my knee, squeezing, though I don't remember how it got there or how long he's been saying, "Isaac? Isaac? Are you okay?"

I blink back to reality, blink away the awful visions, and see instead: a boy with wide eyes, hovering over me, just as he had when I'd tumbled off his roof. I hear myself say, "I'm alright," but Apollo looks just as unconvinced as I feel.

He nudges me, an elbow against my ribs. "That didn't look alright."

I practice the words in my head: *I'm scared of your father. I think I'm losing my mind. Maybe I did hit my head too hard when I fell.* But all that comes out of my mouth is, "If I tell you, you're going to look at me differently."

Apollo, to my great surprise, fails to laugh, to raise a critical eyebrow, or tell me I'm being stupid. Instead, he says, like it's just that easy, like it's simple: "I won't."

And maybe I've been desperate to talk about it, or maybe there's something in his eyes that say I can trust him, but the words come spilling out one after another, and once I start, I

forget how to stop. I tell him about the dreams, about the woman with the red hair and how she used to watch us, and how she has been haunting my nights for as long as I can remember. I tell him about her appearance above me that day when I'd fallen. The only thing I don't tell him is that he's in my dreams too.

"And then this man touched me," I finish. "And I saw a different world, Apollo. It was like...like a vision. Clouds and castles and—like I was seeing someone else's dreams."

"What man?" he asks.

His father's icy blue gaze shimmers behind my eyelids.

"Some stranger at the bus stop. No one important."

Apollo's tongue falls between his lips, his head tilted to one side. Then he tugs the Magic 8-ball out of its pocket and gives it a shake. He shows me the answer: *yes*.

"I asked it if we should find her," he says. "You believe your dreams are you telling you something; I believe in this." He holds up the ball, and his face is so serious, his tone so simple, that any instinct I have to laugh flows out the back of my mind and disappears. "So let's go."

##

The sky outside is dark and colorless now, clouds obscuring the late day sun. But wherever Apollo walks, they part, and brilliant yellow sunlight streams down upon his path. I make a game of watching my shadow appear and reappear the closer I get to him; when our steps are in stride, the sun is bright on my cheeks, warming the side of my face; when I fall behind, the world grows dark and cold and lonely.

"How are you doing that?" I ask, staring up at the sky. The clouds cover the sun again, but when he steps closer, leaning an elbow upon my shoulder and tracking my eyes upward, the sun emerges.



“Weird day,” he says. He taps my nose with one finger, winks, then walks off again, leaving me in the growing darkness until I jog to catch up.

The walk to the retirement home seems shorter now, though we walk slowly side by side. The mystery of the woman lingers heavy on my mind, but Apollo’s company makes it difficult to worry. We talk about school and clubs—he shares tales of his time at the zoo, when a sheep had thought him her mother and followed him around every day for a month; I tell him of my father’s inventions and the jobs I have helped him with, how much better I have gotten at tinkering since we last met. I’ve even learned to start programming my robots with speech.

Caught up in the conversation, I don’t realize how far we’ve gone until suddenly Apollo stops and squeezes my shoulder.

I don’t need the extra nudge he gives me or the whisper of “it’s them again,” to realize what he’s staring at. On the front steps of the Epáratos Retirement Center, the three same women as last time sit side by side, chatting idly in their rocking chairs as they knit the border of their shared blanket. The one in the middle looks up, and total darkness—an absolute black—seems to flicker through her eyes, though I’m sure I’ve imagined it. Today is full of the crazy things I’ve imagined.

Apollo whispers, “I’ve got this,” and before I can stop him, he’s walked up the front steps and is standing before the retired trio with a grin that could stop traffic. He folds his hands politely in front of him as he says, “Good Morning Ma’ams.”

Despite the charm of his approach and the honeyed voice that used to help him to wiggle out of every one of his private lessons when we were six, the women do not budge. In fact, the one in the middle does nothing at all; while her sisters turn up their noses in disapproval, she

continues right on with her work, snipping perhaps a bit too hard on the edges of her thread. I notice that today, she's the one wearing the glasses.

"Get lost, Boy," says the woman on her right.

"Come back when you've got something worth saying," says the one on her left.

In unison, all three women clamp their scissors down on their individual lines of thread, so in sync, it sends shivers down my spine.

Apollo marches back down the steps. "We'll find another way," he says. He waves goodbye to the woman—they do not wave back—then grabs a hold of my elbow and steers me down the building's side-alley. Even the alley, like everything on this side of town, is well kept: stoned pavement, trash cans tucked under an awning; even the weeds seem tasteful.

Apollo finds a cracked window at the end of the lane and gestures me toward it. I had not thought he had it in him. Apollo, the Class President; Apollo, the Golden Child; Apollo, who was as good at being as he was at doing.

He folds his hands in front of him and says, "I'll give you a boost."

"I can do it."

Apollo raises his eyebrows. "And when exactly did you learn to fly?" He's grinning. He is taller than me and stronger, but I am filled suddenly with a boldness I have only ever known in his company. I grab a hold of the window sill and struggle up.

It is not graceful. I am not cool. I pant and sweat, but in the end, I throw myself over the ledge and land on my feet in a brightly lit room filled with shoulder-high plants and elderly people in wheelchairs. Apollo lands beside me effortlessly.

Across the room, three blue couches form a semi-circle where a small group of men and women with white hair and distant eyes sit playing a game of cards. Beside them, a dozen tables

stretch out from one side of the wall to the other. More residents—some connected to walking IV stands, some with canes, some looking quite healthy albeit their shaking hands—meet with friends and family, sharing cups of coffee and scones and smiles. Nurses flitter here and there, handing out pills, helping patients to walk, and settling disputes.

A woman with green eyes dulled by age and a mop of stringy white hair stops in front of us and reaches for Apollo's hands. He allows it, squeezing her ancient fingers while his face crumbles in concern. "Please," she says. "I need my medicine. I've lost my medicine." She is crying. But as she meets Apollo's eyes, and as he holds on to her, her skin begins to change color, a warmth rising in her bone-white body until there is color again behind her cheeks.

I blink, wondering if I've imagined it. But when I open my eyes again, the woman is still pink-faced and staring up at Apollo as if he holds all the answers of the universe.

"Is this your stuff, Ma'am?" Apollo points to one of the couches to our left, where a walker has been abandoned and a game of checkers forgotten. There is no partner on the other side; while the black pieces are scattered across the board, the red stays as stationary as if the game has just begun. Next to the game board, there is a small paper cup filled with water, and two pills on a napkin. When the woman nods, Apollo picks up both the cup and napkin and places them gently into her hands.

She returns to her seat, taking her pills and continuing the game of checkers against herself. Apollo and I walk further into the room. Red hair should be easy to spot, but we stare at a sea of white and gray. Nurses pass by with hair of black, and brown, and blonde, but none pay us any mind; as far as they know, we are just another pair of grandsons come to visit our families.

Then a door opens to our right, and a man in a black and yellow uniform hurries out and skids to a stop, flanked by the three old women who I had not known could stand, let alone walk. The man's eyes are ablaze and on the lookout. The badge on his chest marks him as security, and I waste no time in grabbing Apollo by the arm and dragging him down the nearest hallway. Raised voices carry after us, and so we run.

This should not be fun. I should not be smiling. I should be afraid. I try to imagine what my dad would think if I was caught breaking into a nursing home, but my father is far from my mind as I sprint down an empty hallway, my steps and Apollo's echoing loudly against the white walls and the tiled floors. When I manage a glance to my left, I see him grinning, see my wild excitement reflected back in his golden gaze, and for a moment, all the years we've missed out on are gone. I am five years old again and following him up the giant staircase of his father's home, racing him onto the roof, playing tag in his family's orchard.

We stop at the end of the hallway, hear a voice yelling, "Hey there! Stop!"

Our eyes meet, and as if we've communicated telepathically, we nod and at the same time, shoot off to the right, hurrying down a new hall, a new world of adventures. My feet work without thought, the exhaustion in my chest an expanding balloon. Colors whip by—flashes of bedrooms with light wood, blue drapes and white bed sheets, people in chairs and in beds and standing, bickering with nurses.

"Stop this instant!" We can't see the man, but we can hear him, and his voice grows louder the farther we get. A second joins him. They've brought the cavalry.

"Over here." I tug Apollo into a supply closet and shut the door behind us. Everything goes dark.

There is no room, no light. What feels like a mop presses into my back, the unforgiving handle pinned between my shoulder blades. My foot hits something solid, and I stub my toe on what must be a bucket; when I hit it, water gurgles and shakes from within. If the quiet intake of breath beside me is any indication, Apollo fares no better. He shifts, and suddenly we are chest to chest, and I can hear every gasp for air as we pant, exhausted, in unison.

His breath tickles the side of my face. His hand touches my hip.

And then the door bursts open.

I grab a hold of the mop and step in front of Apollo with the wooden end held up like a sword; the mop brush hangs uselessly, dripping dirty water onto my shoes. At the same time, Apollo attempts to push me behind him, and in a tangle of limbs, we both tumble out of the closet, scrambling to keep our balance. A thin hand reaches out to steady us both, and I look up to meet a scowling face and a shock of bright red hair.

## 6

### Harpy's Hamburgers

“Can mortal man be sure of you on sight, even a sage, O mistress of disguises?”

Homer, translated by Robert Fitzgerald, *The Odyssey*

Up close, she does not look like a reaper. Her tired frown carries no malice. Her fox-tail hair is tied up in a messy ponytail, wisps of it falling into her eyes, which are the color of malachite and overly bright. She looks very young today—much younger than the picture I have of her, as if the last twelve years have aged her backwards.

She stares at us, and we stare at her, and the elephant in the room is sitting on my chest, knocking out all the air, but what can I do about it? I can't run and leave Apollo behind, and though my hands are shaking so hard I think they'll fall off, I can't take them off the broom or I'll lose our only weapon.

I only tap once on the broom handle before the reaper clears her throat.

“Come on,” she says, grabbing a hold of my arm first and then Apollo's. When I stiffen, she adds, almost sympathetically, “I'm not going to hurt you. You wanted to talk to me, didn't you? Well, let's talk. But not here. You'll get their hopes up if they see you.” The last words are whispered; her eyes, locked on Apollo, lose a bit of their shine.

I'd like to say that we put up a fight, that we demand answers then and there. The truth is simpler; we follow her out of the hall and out of the building, two sheep chasing after a wolf. Even outside, I cannot feel the world's chill on my skin—not even the beginning drops of rain—nor, when I draw too close to Apollo, the sun's warmth. I cannot hear the sounds of the city.

Nothing exists but the slap of her tennis shoes on the wet cement, and her voice like rasping leaves. As we walk beside her, keeping in time with her steps lest she leaves us behind, we do not dare even to glance at one another. She speaks a language under her breath that sounds like Latin. “Et in Arcadia, ego.”

We cross the street and enter a diner called Harpy’s Hamburgers. It’s empty except for a single man eating blueberry pie at the high counter. The waitress leans in close, pouring him an amber drink on ice. The restaurant might be on the good side of town, but it’s got the warm, stuffy feeling of a place where the walls are older than the staff. The man—alone in the middle of a work day—wears a fitted suit, but no one else is so nicely dressed. Two girls in sweat pants look up when we enter. No one says a word.

Our booth squeaks as we take our seats, Apollo and I side by side, our hands gripping tight to the seat cushion between us. The woman sits down on the other side of the table just as her phone rings with one, loud, bell-like toll. She ignores it. When a waitress appears—sudden, as if she’d materialized from thin air—the red-haired woman orders three lemonades and three scones with honey. She hands back our menus without ever giving Apollo or me the chance to speak.

I glance at him, finally, and see that his eyes are just as wide as mine feel. In all the years that I had known him, Apollo has never been very good at hiding his emotions, and time has changed nothing at all. I can read it all in his eyes—confusion, curiosity, nerves, excitement. Apollo is good at a lot of things, but I’m better at keeping a straight face; I have to be. The day my mother drove away and never came back, I held my dad’s hand and didn’t bat an eye. My eyes were dry then and have been every day since.

As I watch the scones be placed in the center of our table, watch the woman reach for one, pull one apart with manicured, taffy-colored nails and turn her glittering eyes upon us, I feel a mask settle in over the bones of my face. I am not afraid any longer.

“Who are you?” I ask. “How did you know we were looking for you?”

Apollo leans forward in his seat. He takes a scone but doesn’t eat it. When we were children, a rumor spread through town that he’d plucked a serpent out of the ocean—or maybe it was an eel or just a fish with very large teeth—and he killed it with his bare hands. I have never met that Apollo—the one people are scared of—but when this Apollo’s jaw clenches, I see a shimmer of a serpent-killer reflected in his glasses of lemonade.

“My name is Theodora Amparo,” says the woman. “But you can call me Theo.” She puts out her hand for us to shake, and, reluctantly, Apollo and I follow suit. Her hands are small and pretty and deceptively strong, a grip I’m certain will leave bruises by morning. “And you two have been following me.” Red flashes through her eyes then disappears.

“You were at my house,” says Apollo.

“When I fell,” I finish.

A shadow of something—sadness maybe, or even regret—passes over Theodora’s face, but it’s gone in an instance. “You should really be more careful. What were you kids doing, playing up on the roof like that?” Her phone rings again. Again she ignores it .

“We’re not kids.” The words are out of my mouth before I’ve had time to think them through.

Theodora’s mouth twitches, not quite a laugh, but not a frown either. “Perhaps not,” she says. “But you’re so young. Your world is so young.” She seems to regret the last words, but



before I can ask what they mean, the smell of stale liquor engulfs our table, and the suited man takes a seat beside her.

Up close, I recognize him as the man who had argued with Mr. Skylar that morning: Milos. Despite his nice suit, he does not look so respectable anymore. His eyes are unfocused as he reaches for a scone and glares at Apollo.

“Go,” says Theo, pointing him away from the table.

“I’ve just come to say hi. Don’t be that way,” slurs Milos.

“Do not make me repeat myself.” Theo’s eyes narrow, and now the red shining through her irises is undeniable. She is older, suddenly—ancient, and wise, and much too big for our table. “We are having a private conversation. Now leave us be. Go.”

“Alright, alright.” Milos holds up his hands in surrender. They’re grimy, stuck with pie filling and what looks like charcoal beneath his fingernails. He gets up from the table and returns to the bar where the waitress, laughing, shakes her head at him and pours him a glass of water.

Theo turns back to Apollo and me as if there had been no interruption. “Right,” she says, pointing a scone into my face like a sword. “You need to listen up. I’ll only tell you this once, and you better not forget it. Stay in the middle. And you.” She turns her scone on Apollo, and this time her anger is clear as day. Her eyebrows narrow, her tawny skin flushing with her displeasure. It makes her cheek bones—already high and pronounced—seem more defined somehow, like something sculpted from marble, and her age, already so ambiguous, becomes even harder to discern. “Some people deserve to be forgiven. Your stubbornness can’t go on forever.”

I open my mouth to speak—and if the disgruntled squeak beside me is any indication, so does Apollo—but then a third loud beep makes all three of us jump in our seats. Theodora pulls

out her phone, sighs heavily, then stands up. She shakes scone dust off her hands, says, “I’ll be right back,” and walks outside to take the call.

I watch her go, red hair disappearing into the cloudy day, and then the door slams closed behind her.

“Did any of that make sense to you?” asks Apollo. “*Stay in the middle? Some people deserve to be forgiven?*”

I shake my head. “No. Mean anything to you?”

“No. What’s the middle?”

“No idea.” I reach for a scone, but I’ve never felt less hungry in my life. “Who do you need to forgive?”

“I didn’t even know I was mad at anyone,” says Apollo. He reaches for the lemonade for the first time. My own glass sits, sweating, by my left hand, completely untouched. The small part of me that had wondered if it was poisoned eases slightly when Apollo swallows, licks his lips, and shrugs, still very much alive.

“She said they’d get their hopes up if they saw you. The people in the nursing home,” I remember. “And that woman. She came to you. Have you worked there before?”

Apollo shakes his head. “I volunteer at the hospital every summer. But not there.”

Surprise and confusion have become such common companions in my mind that this news barely fazes me. I grab my own lemonade and take a sip, thinking of middles—the middle of the road, the middle of a fight, the median in a group of numbers—when my distraction sends me dribbling lemonade over my front and onto the table.

Apollo and I both reach for a napkin at the same time and our hands brush. His skin is smooth and hot, like touching a light bulb, and I pull away as if I've been burned. I grab a napkin and stare at my fingers—whole, unfazed, fireproof.

When I look up, I find his worried face staring back at me, eyes narrowed.

Of course Theo chooses that moment to reappear.

She strides across the restaurant and stops with her hands on her hips. "I have to go," she says. "Remember what I told you."

I stand up. "Wait." I have so many questions that I don't know where to start. I've gotten a name but little else. "You can't go." Apollo rises beside me.

"Try not to get into any more trouble," says Theo, and she turns on her heels to leave.

As Apollo and I scramble to follow, Milos crosses the restaurant and blocks our path. His breath has gotten worse, so strong it makes my eyes water. The bulk of him obscures the restaurant door, but I can hear it open and close as Theo exits the building.

"Excuse me," says Apollo, attempting to inch around our roadblock.

I peer over Milos's shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of Theo's bright hair out the restaurant window, but I can't spot her through the fog that's settled close to the ground. It's just like her to disappear right when things are getting interesting—right when the answers are on the horizon. I side step closer to the door. If I run, I might still be able to catch her.

Then the man grabs my arm. Despite the unsteady nature of his legs and the sway of his drunken body, his grip is tight and sure as he steers me back toward the booth. In a health class last year, we learned that drunk people survive car crashes more than sober people because they forget to tense up. "That's why you don't argue either," was my dad's response to my homework. "They have nothing to lose and no concept of consequences. Just nod along until you

can get away.” I apply the same logic now as I would if I was swimming: let the current take you, don’t fight it, wait for a calm moment to get back to shore.

“Sit, sit,” says Milos. “Let’s chat.” He shoves me down, and Apollo sucks in an angry breath. I watch him clench his fists, fighting something inside himself, before he sits down too.

Milos retakes the spot in the booth that Theo had made him abandon and finishes Apollo’s lemonade. “If it isn’t the golden son,” he slurs. “How’s your pretty little mom doing? Pretty little mom with her pretty little twins.”

“Don’t talk about my mother,” says Apollo. The serpent is back, his eyes narrowed into slits, his fists clenched upon the table. In a fight between Apollo and Milos, I’m sure Apollo would win, but I don’t want to test it.

“No disrespect.” Milos’s grin is thin and cheeky. “She’s a lovely lady. Course your daddy loved her. Loved her more than he loves his wife now, you know? How could he not. *Exotic*.” He hiccups and reaches for my glass of lemonade. He finishes this too. “Gave him two pretty little mix-breed kids, didn’t she?”

My blood chills then comes to a frozen stop in my veins. Apollo is standing up, but I can remember just how quickly he’d strike down the boys who bothered me on the playground, and I stand up too, grab his arm, and say, “We have to go.” My boldness catches even me by surprise. “Apollo, I really have to get home. I was supposed to be back an hour ago. Goodbye...Sir.” I glare at the man, grab Apollo by the forearm, and drag him out of the booth and out of the diner.

Beyond the doors, the stuffy tension begins to dissipate, and the sun breaks through the clouds to light our way back down the street.

“You didn’t tell me you had a time limit. I would have—” begins Apollo, but I cut him off before he can finish.

“I don’t. Well, I do. My dad hates when I’m out this late. But he thinks I’m doing homework. I’m fine.”

“You lied?”

“I had to get you out of there.” I remember being five years old and cowering under the glare of a schoolyard bully; ten and hiding behind a dumpster when Eric Nerezza followed me home from school on the first day of summer, determined to teach me the consequences for getting wrong the questions he’d copied off my math exam. Apollo had always come just in time, his power and his height enough to scare off the bad powers of this world.

For the first time, I am the one to rescue him.

“You didn’t need to do that,” he growls.

It is not a sound I am familiar with. I have seen Apollo angry before, but never at me.

“Don’t be mad. Learn to forgive, right?”

Apollo glances back at the diner, but the foggy windows obscure every patron inside.

“Yeah, well you sure got in the middle of things,” he says.

Our eyes meet, and all at once, the tension is gone. I snort back a laugh while Apollo grins his hundred-watt smile. “Weird day,” he says.

I grin. “No kidding.”

##

We’ve gone two blocks or so when I realize my phone is no longer in my pocket. I haven’t seen it since Mr. Skylar drove me home. “I’ll grab it,” says Apollo, nudging my shoulder. “So you don’t have to see my scary dad.”

“I’m not scared of your dad,” I say, wondering just how much he knows about what his father did to mine.

“Then what were you running from?” Apollo raises an eyebrow, a smile playing around the edges of his mouth.

“Motion sickness. From the helicopter,” I lie. We turn back a street, crisscross past shops that are becoming more familiar than my own neighborhood, and stop outside of the Skylar Mansion.

Mr. Skylar stands outside, drawn up to his full height, and arguing with a Middle Eastern man dressed in a maroon sweater and khakis. The man holds three Pit Bulls by the leash, though they make no attempt to get away. One sniffs a tuft of grass on the Skylar’s front yard; another rolls onto his back, legs kicking fruitlessly against thin air; the third stands ready and on guard, searching the yard for invisible threats. The man’s arms are drawn out in front of him, hands painting his concerns in midair while his cheeks redden with anger.

“Oh no,” whispers Apollo. “That’s Mr. Naaji. Him and Dad *hate* each other.”

Mr. Naaji growls something I can’t hear, but as we grow closer, I most certainly hear Mr. Skylar’s response. “It’s not my job to buy croissants, Hadi!”

“It is your job since this is your brunch!” shouts Mr. Naaji.

“It’s *our* brunch. But you’re right; with the amount I’m paying for it, it might as well be mine!”

“They were in the same fraternity in college,” says Apollo. I follow his gaze to the front door of the mansion. It is only a short five feet away, but it might as well be a mile’s trek for all the luck we’ll have in reaching it through this war zone. “Reunions do *not* go well.”

I dart forward, but the men are so caught up in their argument, that no one thinks to stop me until I’ve already crouched down and pet the on-guard Pit Bull. At once, the dog begins to

pant happily, rubbing his head up against my palm. Mr. Naaji pulls on his leash, head whipping around and eying me suspiciously.

“Sorry—” I begin, but by then, the dog is in my lap, licking my chin and pawing at my t-shirt.

“Sir likes you,” says Mr. Naaji.

“Sir?”

He nods toward the overeager dog. “Sir.”

“What an awful name for a dog,” says Mr. Skylar.

“He looks like a Sir.” Apollo has crossed the yard and now crouches beside me, rubbing the belly of the overturned dog. “What’s this one’s name?”

“Apollo, don’t touch that,” says Mr. Skylar. “He might have fleas.”

“That’s Buster,” says Mr. Naaji, shooting a glare at Mr. Skylar. “A very good boy. And very clean. And he—” He points to the last dog, all black and made of pure muscle. “Is Augustus.”

Mr. Skylar crosses his arms over his chest, and at that exact moment, a roar of thunder explodes overhead and echoes through the neighborhood.

“Come on Sir, Buster, Augustus.” Mr. Naaji pulls on the dogs’ leashes and begins to walk away. The dogs strain against their collars, yelping to get back to Apollo and me, but Mr. Naaji tugs them along, and soon they become a shadow in the gloomy, foggy distance.

The sky roars again, louder than ever, and finally, the sky breaks. Rain beats down in a vengeance, not bothering to sprinkle, giving us no time to adjust at all.

Mr. Skylar, Apollo, and I rush to the front porch and hide beneath the towering white pillars and the recently cleaned ceiling.

“You better come inside, Isaac,” says Mr. Skylar. “This is only going to get worse.”

“I don’t mind walking, Mr. Skylar,” I say.

“I can drive him,” says Apollo.

Mr. Skylar shakes his head, shielding his eyes as he stares up at the sky. It has turned a shade of gray so deep, it appears like the face of death itself. I swear I can see red eyes glowering behind the clouds, but perhaps it’s only the hiding sun.

“You’re not driving in this.” Mr. Skylar pulls open the front door and ushers us inside. I scan the road for Mr. Naaji, but he’s nowhere to be seen. Hoping he’s found his way inside, I follow Mr. Skylar and Apollo into the white and blue foyer.

##

I call my father while Apollo places two blankets and a pillow on the floor of his bedroom.

“It’s safer to stay here for the night,” I say over the phone.

Because he can’t argue with this logic, my father grunts his displeasure instead. “Why were you near that house in the first place?”

“I was just walking,” I say. “I wasn’t really going anywhere at all. They just...saw me in the rain and invited me in.” Lying feels strange on my tongue, and I can’t help but think of my dad’s “motto:” we only have each other now, and we have to be honest with each other. But this lie isn’t worse than any of the others I’ve told so far this summer.

The sound he my dad next suggests he doesn’t buy my story at all. “You come home as soon as the storm breaks,” he says.

“I will.” I hang up and make my way to the makeshift bed, but Apollo shakes his head.

“You can sleep in my bed.”



He peels off his wet t-shirt and reaches out his hand. It takes me longer than it should to realize he's waiting for mine. I take it off with shaking hands and give him the wet cloth, feeling suddenly very naked and very small. Where I am skinny, Apollo is enormous, muscles etched across his stomach and shaping his chest; where my skin is littered with bumps and scratches and the usual blemishes of teenage-hood, Apollo's is clear and untouched. To who had he sold his soul in order to look like that, and what were the chances he'd give me their number?

Apollo grabs two shirts from his drawer. The one he chooses, a plain orange t-shirt, fits him like a glove; but mine, blue and baggy, falls around my hips in a shapeless mass. I sit down on the edge of his bed.

"I'm surprised dad's letting you stay," says Apollo, laying down on the blankets. He crosses his arms behind his head and stares up at the ceiling. "He's been real paranoid lately. Doesn't want to talk to anyone. Doesn't want us having anyone over."

I lay down too, but though the bed is only raised a foot or so in the air, I feel as if I lay on the top of a great mountain, as if I have to shout to be heard. "He's not usually like that?"

"I don't know. No. Not really." Apollo sighs. "Maybe with Mr. Naaji. He thinks he wants to ruin his life. But Mr. Naaji is just a mortician. You know, fills bodies with drugs and stuff. Creepy job." Apollo fiddles with his T-shirt. "Dad thinks someone is trying to ruin him. Right before the big plane launch. Thinks something bad is going to happen." There's a long stretch of silence, and then he whispers, "Someone died. His top engineer. He'd been sick for months; that's why my dad wants your dad back. Mr. Torres was going to take sick leave for a while and then come back after the launch. He was getting better, you know...but then he was just gone."

My heart clings to my ribcage like it's a jail door. I should have guessed that anything having to do with Mr. Skylar was horrible. I hardly dare to ask, but the words come out all the same, slow and unbidden, "What happened?"

"I don't know. He was just...sick. And then he died."

"Did he suffer?"

"No. They said it was peaceful. Died in his sleep. Still..." The silence stretches on too long. Beyond the window, the last of the sun has set, and the room is dark between us. I can hear Apollo, but I can't see him. "He lived down the street. He used to invite me over for cookies. The funeral is next week."

It didn't sound like the man was very old. Not if he'd had my dad's job before him. How horrible it must have been—to be there one day and gone the next, all those cookies probably still on the table with no one left to eat them. They must have grown mold by the time the state came to clean them up. Or did the man have a wife who mopped up all the crumbs herself? I'd bet she'll never look at a cookie the same again.

"When did he die?" I ask.

"Last night, I think...Family found him this morning."

I sit up. "Where did he live?"

The room fills with the sound of shifting blankets, and then Apollo clambers to his feet. He joins me on the bed and pulls the curtain away from the window. "There." He points to a house down the street, a house I have never been inside, and yet the sight of it is so familiar, the sight makes my head wobble, like there's a bowling bowl on my neck, and it's filled with the thoughts I don't want to have. It is the same house the Red-Haired Woman, Theo, had stepped out of the night before.

When I tell Apollo this, his eyes widen so that their gold flecks become visible even in the darkness. “But she’s an EMT,” he says. “She was supposed to be there, right?”

“It was the middle of the night. She was all alone.”

“Maybe a house call. She works at that retirement home,” says Apollo. “She could be hospice. He wasn’t young.” Something in his eyes, though, tell me he wasn’t that old either.

I shrug. It doesn’t explain why she’d gestured for me to stay quiet. Not if she was meant to be there. Not if everything she was doing was perfectly normal and legal. “Do you think it could be her sabotaging the company?” I ask.

“My dad thinks it’s Mr. Naaji.”

We sit in a silence so thick, I can feel every brush of Apollo’s breath on my neck, hear the way his chest heaves in and out. When the minutes become too much to bare, I ask, “Do you have pen and paper?”

##

We make a list of suspects: Hadi Naaji, the town’s mortician; his wife, a flower-shop owner; and Theodora Abe, the mysterious EMT and retirement nurse. We write down what we know. Apollo, as their neighbor, knows them best and so does most of the talking. I do the writing.

“Motives,” I prompt, circling the word at the top of the paper.

“Mr. Naaji wanted to go into business with my dad. They were going to go in together on a resort property, I think. Talked about it in college.” Apollo shrugs. “Dad changed his mind. Invested in his own company. Now he’s got a lot of money and a good business and...”

“And Mr. Naaji is dressing up dead people,” I finish for him. “Yeah. Definitely a motive.” I jot down the word *jealousy* under Mr. Naaji’s name.

“Theo doesn’t even know him, does she?” asks Apollo.

“Maybe she’s working for Mr. Naaji.” I imagine an EMT bringing bodies to the morgue, but it’s not exactly a suspicious activity. Unless they were the ones placing people in body bags in the first place—I shudder at the thought—we don’t have much to go on. “But what would she get out of it?”

Apollo throws his magic 8-ball into the air and catches it when it falls. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s promised her something. Maybe after he puts my dad out of business, he’s going to make his own company and hire her on.”

I raise an eyebrow, and Apollo shrugs. “Just draw a grumpy face for now,” he says.

Our theories get no better as the night stretches on, and each idea is more farfetched than the last. “Maybe he needs the plane to crash so a lot of people die, and he has more business! More funerals, you know,” says Apollo.

“Maybe they’re building their own plane together.” I wipe the sleep from the corners of my eyes. “They’ll put it into a competition with your dad’s. Fly it first.”

“Maybe they’re aliens and they don’t want us to...to...” Apollo yawns. “Fly too much. Scared we’ll make spaceships next and find their planet.”

I laugh, but at that exact moment, a giant crash reverberates around the room, and I sit up, shaking, only to find a tree branch pressed against the glass window. The storm carries it away again, the leaves quivering with flood waters. A quick look outside shows water level with the sidewalk and still rising.

“Apollo,” I whisper, but no one answers. I hear his heavy breathing. If anyone could sleep through a storm like this, it would be Apollo Skylar.

I shift onto one side, mouthing the memorized instructions to my flight manuals while I stare out the window until the glass fogs.

##

I'm outside and walking through the storm, my hands above my head as I fight away flying bits of debris. The sun is nowhere to be found, and the water beats down on my shoulders, soaking Apollo's t-shirt. Even my bones are cold, shaking, threatening to vibrate out of my skin. I want to run, but my feet are stuck to the sidewalk.

At the end of the street, a helicopter is parked like a car, the engine running, but no pilot sits inside. I step closer. "Apollo!" I yell. No one answers. I am alone in the storm, staring around for answers, when suddenly a deafening roar breaks through the sky, even louder than the wind. An airplane, the Skylar logo printed on one side, plummets through the night air.

I begin to run. Racing, sprinting, moving so quickly I can hear my heart in my ears, I hurry after the plane and watch it crash into a nearby field. Smoke rises from the cockpit, and flames begin to lick at the wings.

I kneel beside it, reach my hands into the flames, and as my skin begins to burn, I hear a scream in the distance. I'm heaving, bending my knees, pulling with all my might to raise the plane from its fiery coffin, but it's no good. The flames lick my arms, sink their teeth in deep.

My eyes shoot open.

I'm lying still in Apollo's bed while the storm rages behind the window.

Only the window is not there anymore.

Glass is strewn across the floor, and as water pours in through the open gaps, it drips onto my forehead and rolls into my mouth. Apollo stands above me, shaking me awake. I jolt upright, and at once, the water in my hair pours over my face, which might have been funny if I wasn't

breathing like I'd just run a marathon and sitting in a pile of glass shards. By some miracle, none of pierced me, though I notice a few cuts on my forearms.

"Come on," says Apollo. Barefooted and hardly awake, I roll out of bed and follow him out of the room. We tiptoe around the glass and make our way downstairs.

Apollo leads me to the living room, the very center of the mansion and the only room in the house surrounded completely by concrete walls and not more glass. Arianna, Fergus, Aaron, and Mr. and Mrs. Skylar sit on the couch, curled under large, hand-woven blue blankets. It is the closest I have ever seen Arianna and her stepmother, with only a few inches between them. Mr. Skylar, his smile wide and open and frighteningly human, has his arm slung around his wife's shoulder while the two younger kids snooze against the oversized cushions. Mr. Skylar reaches for the remote to flip on the television.

"There you two are," he booms, making room for Apollo and me on his left. "We're all sleeping in here tonight. Much safer." Apollo tells him about the window, and he promises to fix it in the morning. "I'll call someone to cover it up. Don't worry about that now, Boys."

"We thought you died," says Arianna, deadpan. Mrs. Heather Skylar says nothing at all.

I take my seat next to Apollo, feeling very small and very squished between this larger than life family. But then the TV turns on, and Mr. Skylar finds a scary movie—something about ghosts and the living dead—and as Apollo and Heather jump in fright, and Arianna mumbles about the unrealistic special effects, I begin to feel something I never thought I would in this house: I begin to feel at home.

When, in the movie, a decaying body pops out of the closet, Apollo reaches for my hand and squeezes, but my eyes are glued across the room. Mrs. Skylar has stopped watching the screen; instead, she stares at Mr. Skylar with a longing, desperate gaze, as though he's placed the

sky together with his own two hands. When the storm makes the house shake, she flinches like she's been struck.

## The Sun King

It's quite a sight, a strange parade:  
 a man with a pair of wings strapped to his arms  
 followed by a flock of rowdy boys.  
 Some squawk and flap their bony limbs.  
 Others try to leap now and then, stumbling  
 as the sand tugs at their feet.  
 Saeed Jones, *Daedalus, After Icarus*

The engineer's funeral is held a week later, and because the man was a former colleague of my father's, he doesn't argue when I confess that I'm Apollo's plus one. With a vein twitching visibly in his forehead, he scans our cupboards and fridge for suitable mourning dishes, mumbling under his breath all the while, "Plus one's are for weddings, not funerals."

He finds cake mix two days from expiration, and after a messy, frosting-drenched attempt at baking, we both gather our best clothes out of the back of our closets and arrive at the city graveyard by four o'clock.

The sun is too bright to be properly sad, but that doesn't stop the congregation: a mass of black-clad, crying middle-agers with a sobbing widow at the front. I learn her husband's name: Diego Torres, a man who the priest claims was one of the best of his generation, kind and generous and endlessly smart. His widow has a pinched, pink face, and when the local church choir begins to sing around the grave, she falls to her knees and buries her head in her hands. I



wish I could pat her on the back and tell her everything will be okay, but she doesn't know me, and I don't know her, and strangers never really appreciate that sort of stuff.

Theo is not there, but Mr. and Mrs. Naaji are. They stand in the distance, arm in arm outside a two-story house that borders the cemetery. Mr. Naaji's wife is a short Brown woman with thick black hair that stretches to her waist and lips painted the color of blood. The pair waits until the casket is lowered into the ground, then they retreat inside.

I have never been to a funeral before. The last time I wore these clothes—a white dress shirt and a black tie I'd dusted off before coming—it was middle school graduation. It's too small now, tight around my waist and too short on my wrists and ankles, but it's not the squeeze that holds my breath hostage in my lungs, that makes every deep breath feel like the last one. I don't know Mr. Torres, but it is not difficult to imagine my own funeral: a closed casket because my brain has splattered open on the hard ground after my fall, and my father on his knees, sobbing. I glance at Apollo and Arianna, their heads bowed respectfully, their expensive black clothes perfectly tailored. Maybe they'd come to my funeral too. But it's more likely my father would chase them away and mourn alone.

I fold my hands by my belt and lower my eyes to the dirt. It's the strangest feeling—knowing someone was in the world once and won't ever be again. I don't know Mr. Diego Torres, so I don't know how to miss him. But I feel eerie all the same, a weird emptiness that tingles through my arms, making my blood feel a lot like lead. Like I've been sleeping a million years and that sluggish feeling just won't wear off. Even when I think of my mom, I can imagine in her a hotel room somewhere, watching bad TV and eating a microwaved meal, crying about how she left us, the best parts of her life, and how she'll never be whole again. In my

imagination, she's sad, and she's far away, and I don't expect to ever see her again. But I could if I really wanted to. And that makes all the difference.

##

When it's all over, my father walks back to the car, shooting weary looks at Arianna and Apollo as they slouch slowly behind us, whispering about how Mr. Torres once let them help decorate his Christmas tree. His widow is still crying, supported by two women on either side of her. The rest of the crowd murmurs about their memories and about the things that are buried in the ground with Mr. Torres: his favorite watch, his catcher's glove, his crossword puzzles, his baking apron.

"Remember when we made Christmas cookies with him?" say Arianna. "We're never going to get to do that again."

We reach the sidewalk, and the twins stop, looking around for their parents. My father marches toward the parking lot. As he tugs open the passenger door to our cramped car, I stop walking.

"Can I stay?" I ask, gathering confidence with every syllable. The widow is sobbing now louder than ever, and it isn't a soundtrack to say no to. "Please? They're pretty upset about this. Please. Just for a little bit."

My father glances at the twins, then at me, then at the mourners, still gathered, weeping, around Mr. Torres' grave. Slowly—with just the slightest, nearly incomprehensible twitch of his head—my father nods. If I didn't already know my nightmares by heart, I'd think this was one of them: death, crying people, and my dad letting me out of his sight like he never does in the waking world.

I double back and, as my father drives away, I accidentally brush wrists with Apollo. His fingers grasp mine, squeeze, then let go. “How are you doing?” I ask. He shrugs.

Arianna says, “Shitty.”

The three of us walk in silence past one gravestone after another, moving slowly because I can’t help but stop every few feet to read the inscriptions. They’re fascinating, with names I’ve never heard of before and each one with its own inscription: *wife and mother, father and brother, husband and son*—a dozen different relations, but so little about the people themselves.

“When was the last time you think anyone said any of these names out loud?” I ask. “Atropos. Lamia.” I reach out to trace the death year—1919—but Arianna grabs my wrist before my fingers grace the stone.

“Don’t,” she says, as if I’d been about to commit some sort of crime. “Let them rest.” She tucks her hands back into her pockets and looks off toward the sun-light parking lot.

“What do you think happens when you die?” asks Apollo.

I think of what my science teacher would say, that when you die that’s the end—your body decays in the ground and becomes flowers or weeds—but the priest had said Mr. Torres was in the after-life. It seems incredible that after so many years of modern science, we still haven’t figured out how to track what happens after you die. There are no robots you can send to the grave like you send to Mars, no rovers to report back. No engineering book ever prepared me for this.

As I shrug and tap my pocket, Arianna says, “When you die, you become a dog.” And Apollo says, “Or a wolf.” And they both laugh uncomfortably. I grin, but I’m not in on the joke. It’s not a new feeling, not in their company, but it’s harder to play along here amongst the unsaid names, harder to be happy when the whole world seems so sad.

The graves are watching us, and it doesn't matter if people turn to dust or plants or get reincarnated as animals: something is alive beneath these graves, something breathes, something moves. Even if it's just the earthworms.

##

I drive with the Skylars to the wake and find my father already parked outside. Inside Mrs. Torres' house, his and Mr. Skylar's are the only white faces in a sea of brown. Mrs. Skylar has gone home, and so Mr. Skylar brings her homemade potato salad into the kitchen where it gets lost amongst platters of tamales, chilaquiles, enchiladas, and an extra-large pot of pozole—"All of Diego's favorite foods," I hear a woman say, crying, as she stacks her plate high. The scent of spiced pork reminds me of something I can't put a name to, a foggy memory where I am three or four, and it's early in the morning, birds chirping, and a woman with dark hair and dark eyes, stands over the stove singing Spanish lyrics under her breath. I want to call her my mother, but she could just as easily be a friend of my father's; she could just as easily be a figment of my imagination.

My father waves me over, but I pretend not to see him as I follow Apollo and Arianna into the kitchen.

It's immediately clear that I've made the wrong choice, that I'm not meant to be here. Apollo and Arianna know their place: Arianna makes a beeline for Mrs. Torres, who stands at the counter, juggling plates and searching for a place to set them with watering, bloodshot eyes. Apollo grabs a mop to clean up the dirt footprints that guests have left on the beige tiles. Even Mr. Skylar is helpful—his booming voice echoing around the house as he tells praising, boasting stories of Mr. Torress' work. Only I'm left standing in the doorway, useless, like an alien off a just-landed ship, lost and bug-eyed and completely frozen.

It'd have been better if I'd just blended into the wall and evaporated entirely.

"Let me take that for you." Arianna's voice is higher, sweeter than I've ever heard it, every syllable pronounced with delicacy. She maneuvers dishes from Mrs. Torress arms with the skill of a short-order cook and places a cheese-drenched chicken casserole in the center of the counter. "I can start serving everyone," she says. "You take a seat."

Mrs. Torres nods, her crying renewed, and heads for the couch while Apollo rearranges the kitchen to make room for an incoming platter of chicken empanadas. As he hands one plate to his sister, she places a generous square of casserole upon it, and he brings it to the widow. They repeat this food-based assembly line—moving to two plates at a time—until Arianna hisses, "Isaac, take this," and I wake up from my daze.

I take two plates and venture into the center of the fray.

Like my house, Mrs. Torres' walls show sign of decay: paint peeling, pictures not so straightly hung, and the outlets well-rusted. Unlike mine, her house is bursting at the seams.

Though the building—a single story cottage that must have been built in the 80's—is modest at best, nearly sixty people crowd the couches, slouch against the walls, or take to the backyard, chatting in hushed tones as they accept the food we offer and sprinkle the casserole with salt, hot sauce, or tears. Some have all three.

If this is what the salary of a head engineer makes for Skylar Air, it isn't much, but Zach shows no signs of shame as he maneuvers through the building as if he owns this too, laughing too loud and smiling too wide and offering his apologies as if the words are foreign on his tongue. It's comforting, I suppose, to know that even in the worst of situations, some things never change.

I bring my first plate to a middle-aged woman with her back to the kitchen, hair hidden in a pretty maroon scarf, and her lavender perfume so strong, it overpowers the cheese-drenched food I hand her. It is a moment before I realize—as she turns to thank me, and I catch sight of her dark eyes and purple-painted lips—that she is Apollo and Arianna’s mother, Ms. Tallie.

“If it isn’t Mr. Hagar,” she says, tugging on a smile. There are no tears on her cheeks, and though the guilt feels like maggots in my stomach, I’m glad to see it. I’m not the only one whose dried eyed in sea of human fountains. Her makeup—winged eyeliner, dark mascara—is impeccably applied and free of smudges.

She ushers me to sit beside her. I sink into the cushions. She points her fork idly into the air and says, “Well come on, eat. We have two plates, don’t we?”

She smiles, and I try to smile back, but the feeling is all wrong on my lips. As I swirl the chicken around my plate, looking around the house for something to fix—a burnt out light bulb, a broken computer, anything at all that I can put back together to make myself useful, even if it just means I’m the guy who tries turning it on and off again—Mrs. Tallie asks, “Did you know Mr. Torres very well, Isaac?”

I shake my head.

“Me either. Not well.” She gathers food onto her fork. “I was his surgeon. But there’s not much time to talk in the O.R.” Her mouth twitches, but if she’s about to smile, she quickly fights it off. “He went so quickly. What a terrible shock.”

Something Apollo said a week before drifts back into my memory. “I thought he was sick.”

“He was.” Ms. Tallie nods, swallowing down a bite of casserole. She hisses from the heat and waves a hand over the steaming cheese. “But he’d been doing so much better. We all thought he’d won the fight. Looked like a full recovery and then...”

Her voice drifts off, and because I’m hanging on her every word, each beat of silence is torture. I know she’s putting off the inevitable, trying to be decent, trying not to say the words *he died*, but the anticipation feels less like relief and more like a mallet crashing down on my skull. I imagine Theo leaving Mr. Torres’ house—for no matter how dark it might have been, and no matter how kind she had been in person, I’m certain that was where she had come from, that she had left his house the night he’d died and motioned for me to keep her secret. *Dad thinks someone is trying to ruin him, thinks something bad is going to happen*. If Apollo, the most hopeful boy I’ve ever known, has been worried, and if his mother, as smart as she is, sees holes in what’s happened, why shouldn’t it be something terrible? How could it be anything else?

“Well I went and ruined your whole evening, didn’t I?” With a sardonic smile, Ms. Tallie moves her chicken from one side of her plate to the other and reaches out to squeeze my hand. I try not to jump, try not to move at all, but my nerves are all fried, and I twitch when her fingertips graze my palm.

“But I guess you didn’t have much chance of a good day today, now did you?” she says. “Oh, I won’t be eating any of this. I don’t know why I pretend.”

A voice like Arianna’s—or maybe the strange woman in my might-be memory—yells for me to do something. It’s not a fix, not putting piece A into slot B, not reinventing the airplane, but it’s a start. I jump to my feet and extend a hand. “I’ll take it.”

Ms. Tallie smiles, though she looks exhausted. “Thank you.” She hands over her plate. Then her eyes dart above my head, and she snaps her fingers twice, hissing, “Apollo, Arianna.” A moment later, her children appear beside us.

“There you are,” says Arianna, glaring in my direction. “You abandoned us.”

“I kept him busy.” Ms. Tallie picks up her purse from where it’s been resting between her ankles. As she shuffles through it, she says, “I want you all to get out of here. You did your grieving for the day. Go...go to the movies or something. Go be kids.” She pulls out two twenty-dollar bills.

At the same time that I splutter, “I can’t accept that,” Apollo and Arianna burst into speech, mumbling half-formed excuses and pushing the money back toward their mother. It’s almost—well—*nice*, not to be the odd man out this time, not the only one staring at offered money like it’s a timebomb. If my dad knew I’d taken that much money, he’d kill me.

“Dad already gave us some,” Apollo finally admits while Arianna taps the toes of her shoes together and avoids everyone’s eyes.

Ms. Tallie’s fist closes over the crumpled bills. Her lips press tightly together. “Right,” she says. “Of course he did. Well that’s...that’s good. You three get going then.”

We don’t need to be told twice. Hurrying out of the front room—where Mrs. Torres has begun singing in broken, tear-filled Spanish—Apollo, Arianna, and I make our zig-zagged way through the mourners and head for the door. As we pass by my father to drop off the dishes, we see him stuck in the kitchen with a chatty Mr. Skylar. Downing his beer, he calls out my name, waving the bottle over his head to get my attention. I lower my gaze toward my shoes and walk faster.

##



We don't make it to the movies.

Halfway to the theater, Arianna gets a text that causes her to giggle—loud and giddy and high-pitched, as if some other girl has invaded her body, some girl that hadn't once deemed Valentine's day "completely useless" because it never included real arrow shooting. "I have to go," she says, and just like that, she's gone, quite literally running away across the street.

"She's been mooning over that girl for weeks," explains Apollo, rolling his eyes.

"She's—" I begin, but Apollo finishes the sentence for me.

"A closeted hopeless romantic. Yeah." He tucks his hands into his pockets and stares out at the horizon, watching the sunset over the water. On this side of town, there are no towering buildings to block out the light. "I don't really want to go to the movies, do you?"

I start to say no, to say that there's nothing I really want to see, that I don't even care what we do next, and that I really don't want to spend his father's money anyway, but all that comes spilling out of my mouth is: "I think Theo killed Mr. Torres."

For a whole thirty seconds, Apollo says nothing. My heart pounds the whole time: boom, boom, boom, boom. The whole day has been like running a marathon without ever moving, and now we're at the finish line, and it's horrible. Because I think I know what the first-place ribbon is, and it's tracking down the killer.

What a way to spend the summer.

Apollo gestures toward a path between two buildings, and we walk through a wide, well-lit brick alley and emerge on the other side just feet from the beach. I haven't dared to breathe, and Apollo seems unwilling to speak. He kicks off his shoes and socks, rolls up his black slacks, and strides confidently into the sand.

"Mom said it was suspicious," he says finally.

With shoes still on, I follow him toward the ocean, hardly noticing the waves or the sun, or anything that isn't his face. He's deep in concentration, eyes focused on something I can't see. "If she was his nurse, she would have opportunity," he says.

"Did your mom say that she was?"

Apollo shakes his head. "She only saw him at the hospital. She would have been an at-home nurse. Mom doesn't know anything about who they were."

We find the last dry spots of sand before the tide breaks, and we sit down. Apollo leave no distance between us, his hip a mere inch from my own. "You really think she saved you?" he asks.

I nod. "I don't know how she did it. But she did it."

"Maybe she really just wanted to give your dad a job," he says.

"Maybe." But I can't imagine that: a perfect stranger, wanting so badly to help me and my father that she'd kill an innocent man to do it. No one's ever cared about us that much before, and if this is what help looks like, I don't want anything to do with it.

After a long stretch of silence, I tell Apollo, "We don't have beaches like this on my side of town. It's just the docks. That's where I first heard the F word." I sigh, as if it's some treasured memory, and Apollo grins.

"Arianna taught me," he says. "She learned it from church." We both laugh at that. But when we fall quiet once more, staring out at an ocean stained in periwinkle, the only sound that breaks the thick summer air is the distant chirping of cicadas. From his pocket, Apollo pulls out his magic 8-ball and tosses it in my direction.

"You brought this to the funeral?" I ask.

"When do people have more questions," says Apollo, "than at a funeral?"

##

We play catch with the magic 8-ball until the sun has set, until the night makes it too dark to see much of anything.

“We just gotta follow them,” I say, falling back onto the sand. The stars glitter brightly above, and I find myself thinking, idly, that if I were ever lucky enough to go on a date, this would be the place to do it. “Theo and Mr. Naaji. If either of them did it, there has to be proof somewhere.”

Apollo hums his agreement.

“We’ll need codenames,” I say.

Apollo laughs. “Why? I like the names we have.” He lays down beside me. I watch the shadow of the magic 8-ball move from one of his hands to the other then back again.

“It’s part of being undercover. Being detectives,” I explain.

“So, who would I be?”

“The Sun King.” I speak too quickly. The stars and the sand have made me lethargic. The world is very large, and the sky very far away, and the magnitude of this search very daunting, but none of it feels real. Not now. Not here. I’m too tired to even remember my usual mouth-filter.

I hear Apollo shift beside me. “Why?”

“Because the sun follows you,” I say.

“It does?” Apollo leans up on his elbow and tosses me the ball again. I catch it by the edge of my fingertips, a shapeless, shadowy mass in the darkness.

“You haven’t noticed?” I throw it back.

I imagine that he shakes his head, but I can't be sure, can't see anything but the ball leaving my fingertips then come back into my grip a moment later. I'm amazed by my own instincts.

"You'd be Flyboy," says Apollo. This time, he does not throw the ball back. I hear him lay back, body shifting restlessly.

"Why?"

"Because you're going to be a pilot, aren't you?"

I remember sitting with Apollo in his father's helicopter so many years before, remember watching the planes leave the runway and soar above our heads. We had promised to follow them one day, to fly together. "My dad will never let me," I say. "He's scared I'll get hurt."

"Are you?"

It's a good question, and not one I'm prepared to answer. I didn't enjoy having a broken arm, but I was also just a kid, and I hardly remember anything beyond the annoyance of having to stay out of the public pool and having to wrap a plastic bag around my arm to shower. I don't enjoy the dreams—the endless swirling in my stomach, the panic as I fall toward the Earth. But I can't deny the exhilaration I'd felt in the helicopter either, how right it had felt to finally have my hands on the controls.

I stand up. "Let's find out." I point along the coast, where a cliff face rises up from the water, illuminated eerily in the moonlight.

"You want to climb that?" asks Apollo. "Right now?"

I nod. Images of his roof flash before my eyes—that very real, very endless fall—but it hadn't killed me then, and if Theo is so set on saving me, why should she let this night be any different?

“Ask your oracle.” I point toward the magic 8-ball, and with a shrug, Apollo shakes it. We both lean in close to watch the glittery, glowing letters spell out: *yes*.

Apollo’s nervous expression, the same one he has so often worn in my father’s company, turns into an ear-splitting grin. “You’re crazy, Isaac. Alright, little daredevil. Let’s do this.”

I grin. “Daredevil is my middle name.”

Apollo laughs and pushes me teasingly. “That was bad,” he says. “That was so bad.”

##

We climb the rocks one at a time, stepping from boulder to boulder, through ankle-deep water and trusting in the moonlight and our own feet to guide us. Every ten steps or so, we pull out our phones and light up the rest of the path, seeing thirty more feet, twenty, ten, five.

The air at the top of the cliff is cooler than the beach, the breeze stronger. I suck in a deep, shaking breath and I stare out at the ocean; it’s beautiful when you aren’t plummeting into it, beautiful when it’s not the star of my nightmares.

I take a seat on a rock almost as big as I am and pull my knees to my chest. Apollo sits on the stone ground beside me, his head rested on my leg. He yawns into the darkness. “It’s nice up here,” he says.

“Yeah.” I fidget restlessly, too aware of his every breath as it tickles my thigh, and of the ocean so very far beneath us, and of the sky. The endless sky. “You follow Mr. Naaji,” I say. “I’ll follow Theo.”

I can’t see it, but I know when Apollo nods. He puts out his hand and we shake on our future discoveries, on our quest for proof. “Alright,” he says. “Mission on.”

And so we watch the moonlight dance on the sea until my father calls, shouting over the line, that he’s parked outside the movie theater, and it’s time to go home.

## Off the Deep End

“The boy had not long to wait, for the sun, who sees everything, soon noticed him.”

Doris Gates, *Apollo: The Golden God*

From that night on, we become detectives. My phone, usually so quiet over the summer when there are no friends to contact for homework, lights up at all hours of the day.

I text:

**Flyboy, Monday 4:35pm:** Flamingo spotted at the drug store, buying chips. Nothing suspicious.

He sends:

**Sun King, Monday, 4:36pm:** Death is still in his lair, biding his time in the underworld.

**Sun King, Tuesday, 2:12pm:** Death hasn't emerged for five hours and I'm so hungry I'm about to join him in the underworld. You up for burgers? Harpy's Hamburgers is calling my name.

**Flyboy, Tuesday, 2:13pm:** I'll be there in five.

**Flyboy, Friday, 11:02am:** Your dad has sent me on three coffee runs and it's not even noon yet.

**Sun King, Friday, 11:02am:** Don't blaspheme coffee in my house.

**Sun King, Friday, 11:03am:** I'll pick them up and come over. What did they order?

**Sun King, Friday, 11:04am:** Don't worry. He'll upgrade you from Coffee Boy soon. You'll be employee of the year by Monday.

**Sun King, Wednesday, 3:47pm:** Refill the coffees and sneak out. I'm picking you up from work. Don't say no. I saw Death and Flamingo at Harpy's. Spymode activated.

**Flyboy, Thursday, 10:32am:** Well you were right. No one noticed I was gone yesterday.

**Sun King, Thursday, 10:35am:** Sorry yesterday was a bust. Who brings their dogs to Harpy's?

**Flyboy, Thursday, 10:36am:** You would if you had any.

**Sun King, Thursday, 10:37am:** I will pretty soon if Arianna doesn't stop trying to get herself killed.

You know she's trying to kidnap a wolf? Said she heard it in the woods and it needs a family.

**Flyboy, Thursday, 10:38am:** You're hoping she does it, aren't you?

**Sun King, Thursday, 10:41am:** ...maybe.

**Flyboy, Monday, 1:01pm:** Your dad gave me the day off. Does this mean I'm fired?

**Sun King, Monday, 1:12pm:** It means he likes you. Days off are the ultimate dad prize.

**Flyboy, Monday, 1:13pm:** But now I'm bored.

**Sun King, Monday, 1:14pm:** Enjoy the beauty of the day, for life is short and youth ever fleeting.

**Flyboy, Monday, 1:22pm:** What are you a poet now? That was really lame.

Apollo arrives at my front door ten minutes later with a guitar strapped to his back. His head whips around, checking to make sure my father is gone—"He's at the store," I assure him—then he lets himself inside. There's a sensation in my stomach like I've just swallowed a whole bottle of vinegar as I sweep quickly down the hall, as if by beating him to my room, I can somehow keep him from seeing how small my house is, keep him from noticing the mortifying array of baby photos on the wall or the height chart that hasn't been updated in years, suggesting I am still just five foot even.

I swing open the bedroom door and point him inside, all too aware of the dirty clothes beneath my bed and scattered across the worn beige carpet. The window rattles from the summer breeze, and because the glass is still cracked, the light that streams inside is fragmented and harsh and nothing at all like the brilliant kaleidoscope home he lives in with his father.

If Apollo notices, however, he says nothing. He makes his way to my bed, falls back carelessly onto the pillows, and pulls a small notebook out of his pocket. He tosses it my way as he maneuvers his guitar on his lap and begins to strum. I flip through it, seeing that nearly every

page is filled with the hasty scrawl of a hand desperate to finish its thought. I catch glimpses of lines like *I've lost to cupid in a shooting match* and *paint the white raven black* before his voice fills the room.

“My sister has a bunch of girls, but I do a bunch of curls, so I guess that it’s eeeeven,” sings Apollo, grinning at me across the room. His hands flutter across the guitar without thought, long fingers strumming out an upbeat tune. “We have this friend who’s kinda sick, and his name is Isa-ick. Which is better than Steeeeven.” He winks.

I throw the lyric book at his head, and we both collapse into fits of laughter.

##

Two weeks into our investigation, we’re no further along in our mission than when we’d begun, but I now have a phone full of texts detailing the daily specials at Harpy’s and hospital anecdotes Apollo can’t help but share.

**Sun King, Friday, 4:12pm:** Last night, a guy had the pointy end of a hammer lodged in his brain. Today’s pretty slow. Just a couple of coughs.

It’s still more interesting than my work.

I slump at my intern’s desk in the basement of the Skylar Mansion, my head in my hand as I check the room. The super-secret lab only holds a dozen employees, but beside their badges—which all read Top Secret Clearance—it’s lacking a few crucial spy-mode elements: like being interesting, for one thing.

Everyone still has a full mug of coffee, and as I’ve already brought the lunch they ordered, there isn’t much left for me to do.

It’s not exactly what I imagined. I thought by now I’d have been elbow deep in a plane fuselage, helping to build the engine that would keep thousands of future passengers in the air. Or that I’d at least get to watch the experts do it, that I’d get to take notes on their methods, get



some on-the-job training. But all I end up watching is grown adults fuss over their too-hot-espressos.

Then at half past four, with thirty minutes left of my shift, Mr. Skylar calls me to his desk, and for one heart stopping moment, as he leans over the blueprints, a proverbial light bulb flickering above his head, I'm sure he's about to let me in on the company secrets. That I'm going to be on the In-Crowd, just as he'd promised: to make me another hand on deck.

But when I reach the desk, summoned by the snaps of his fingers, he simply shoves the second half of his sandwich into my hand. The paper crumples against my palm, flecks of mustardy lettuce jumping out to stain the napkins balled up in his fist. "Here," he says. "You eat yet?" He returns to his work without another upward glance.

Before I return to my desk, I catch a sight of his vision: numbers upon numbers upon numbers, computer code, and a whole network of technological webs that make my mouth water.

"Hey, Kid," calls one of the assistants. He holds up his coffee mug.

At least it's something to do.

I take it and head upstairs. After a whole afternoon of being submerged in the darkened basement, I am nearly blinded by the sunlight streaming through the many, many windows of the mansion. At the far end of the hall, one of the windows is held shut by a wooden board nailed into the frame, the last evidence of the storm. With the way the sun shines now, I sometimes wonder if it was all a dream.

I stop in the kitchen, fill the mug, and am heading back toward the basement stairs when I see her out the window: Theo, checking covertly over her shoulder, then darting across the street and disappearing behind a mass of bricked buildings. Excitement rushes through me like wild

fire, the blood in my veins so much hotter than the coffee I now set aside, forgotten. I pull out my phone and text Apollo: Flamingo spotted. I'm on the move.

Trusting that no one will miss me downstairs, I grab my backpack from the front rack, toss it over my shoulder, and dart out the door.

Theo is easy enough to find, hair a glittering red beacon in the sunlight, but she moves as quick as a fox. She darts from street to street, and at every corner, she stares backwards over her shoulder, holding her pink and blue spotted backpack tight to her body, as if expecting a follower. As if expecting me.

I learn to dart behind trash cans, cower behind recycling bins and building columns, to move as quick as light, to stay on my toes. I've walked barely a quarter mile, always keeping the vision of red right ahead, when I collide into another body, so solid it feels like a brick wall. I stumble back, rubbing my shoulder where it's hit Apollo's, and look up at his surprised face.

"What are you doing here?" we ask in tangent.

"I was following her." I point to Theo just as Apollo points ahead and says,

"I was following him."

Apollo moves his pointed finger to his lips then gestures forward, indicating the building before us. I had been so focused on Theo, I had hardly noticed where I was going, but now I squint ahead to read the sign. Across the street, wide and one-storied, sits a black-trimmed, stoned fortress with the words *Epáratos Mortuary* inscribed with silver letters above the door. Mr. Naaji stands in the doorway, cloaked in shadows.

As Theo approaches, he steps out of the door and scrubs a hand over his disheveled, unshaved face. He wears what appears to be a homemade sweater—blood red with a forest green

tree in the middle—tucked into a pair of jeans rolled up three times to reveal his very hairy shins and dog-printed socks above his Sperry’s tennis shoes.

“Not again,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Come on.” Theo edges closer to the mortician and pulls out a stack of papers from her backpack. “Can’t you do it just this one time?”

“That’s what you said last time.” Mr. Naaji speaks like he holds the weight of the world in every syllable. From somewhere behind him, a dog barks, then another, and soon the triplets have struck up a chorus of whines and yelps that echo around the neighborhood.

“What do you think it is?” I ask.

Apollo shrugs. “Evidence. Got to be.”

“What are we looking at? Hear anything good?”

The voice comes from behind us, so sudden and sinister, I’m positive I’ve jumped straight out of my skin. Apollo stiffens and takes a step in front of me.

A woman stands behind us, arms crossed over her chest and a smug smile on her crimson lips. Her black hair, braided and wrapped around her head like a crown today, is interlaced with orange Marigolds, which might have made her look friendly if her eyes were not so deadly.

“Having a good time, boys? Let me guess, the brains and the muscle?” She points first to me and then to Apollo. “Come here to see a dead body?”

“No, Ma’am” I say quickly. “We just—”

She laughs, and before I can finish (which is good because I did not have an explanation ready), she repeats, “Ma’am. Well I don’t mind the sound of that.”

For a moment, I am sure we're off the hook. She certainly smiles like we are, her eyes far off and dreamy. Then, as if an angry spirit has again possessed her body, her eyes narrow and she snaps, "It's not going to work, whatever little plan you've cooked up."

"We weren't—" starts Apollo, but again, the woman is too quick for us.

"Let's pretend I believe you," she says. "If you're not here to sneak a peek, then what is it? Here to throw eggs at my husband again?"

Her husband. I stare back over my shoulder at Theo and Mr. Naaji, but they must have gone inside. The front porch of the mortuary is empty but for a single, tawny cat, rubbing its back up against the brick steps.

"We were..." I stumble over the words and look to Apollo, but he looks too much like a deer in headlights to be any help. "We were looking for a friend. She has red hair, about this tall." I raise a hand above my head and brush Apollo's ear.

"Your friend?" Mrs. Naaji hardly looks convinced. She fiddles with her necklace—a string of clamshell disc beads and square abalone pendants that reflect back her scowling face—and waits, as if the jewelry might come alive and confirm her suspicions, save her the trouble of calling us liars herself. "Your friend is a hospice nurse. She likes to ask my husband for favors." Her voice is empty of emotion, but a smile plays behind her eyes. A pink flush blooms across the brown of her cheeks. "We're old friends."

"What kind of favors?" asks Apollo.

"Funerals. For dying patients with no families to mourn them and no money to pay for a headstone." Her anger, like the tide, recedes, her face momentarily sad and still; then it crashes back in full force as she says, "Not that it's any of your business."

She grabs my shoulder first, then Apollo's, and steers us away from her house. "It's a bright summer day. Two young kids like you should be at the pool. Go. Get."

##

Maybe because it feels like her eyes follow us down every block, or maybe because the sun is beating down hotter than ever, Apollo and I do wind up at the pool. I pay the two dollars it costs to enter—"My treat," I tell Apollo—and we kick off our shoes, rent two towels, and sit down at the water's edge. Apollo texts Arianna, mumbling, "We need backup."

The world reeks of chlorine and sunscreen, and though the water is cool and refreshing, even the sounds of screaming kids and lifeguards blowing their whistles in a discorded symphony can't erase what we've just witnessed.

But when I look at Apollo, I don't find my own amazement and confusion reflected back at me. I see awe. He's kicked his shoes off as quickly as humanely possible and now stares around the pool, eyes darting from one lifeguard tower to the next, to the foam noodles the little kids use to beat each other with, and the floaties the toddlers waddle around in.

"Have you never been to a pool before?"

His head whips around, looking as if he'd forgotten I was there. "I've been to a pool," he said. "Once. When I was a kid. Then it was always my pool. The swimming instructor—"

I cut him off before he can finish the sentence. "Came to your house. Like your tutors. Right. Well..." I tug the sunglasses off of Apollo's face and put them on my own; they fall to the tip of my nose. "Us poor kids come to places like this. My dad made me take swim lessons as soon as I turned three. And every weekend after that."

My dad was almost as intense about swimming as he was about flying. He preferred I keep my feet on solid ground, I think, but at least water he could prepare me for. I've known the backstroke since I was four.

A smile cuts across Apollo's frustratingly angelic jaw line. "You had to wear the floaties, didn't you?"

Luckily, my face is already too hot under the sun for him to see me blushing.

##

The pool isn't busy today—only a handful of under 10's running wild across the yard and their parents on the lawn chairs, reading magazines and *For Dummies* books. The lifeguard sits at the top of a white tower, yelling, "No running! No running!" on repeat.

"They know each other," I say, trusting no one will hear me over the uproar. No one but Apollo. Theo and Mr. Naaji slide through my mind like images on the pool's surface. The way they'd stood so close. The way he'd said, 'not again.' Mrs. Naaji had confirmed their working together, but what did that mean?

Apollo shrugs off his shirt and lays down on the pool deck. "You think Mrs. Naaji was telling the truth?" he asks.

I shrug, watching the way his chest rises and falls with every breath. "She doesn't have any reason to tell us the truth."

"Maybe she doesn't have a reason to lie either." Apollo takes back his sunglasses and turns on his side, propping his head up on one hand.

"Your dad and Mr. Naaji were in the same fraternity, right?" I ask. Apollo nods. "Well maybe Theo went to school with them too. Mrs. Naaji said they were all old friends. Maybe

she's got a grudge against him too for—for something they did at school. Does your dad have any old photo albums?"

"Tons." The voice does not come from Apollo, but from his twin; Arianna crosses the pool deck and flops down beside her brother, pushing her own sunglasses into her hair. "Worry no more," she says. "The muscle has arrived." She flexes her biceps.

"You're not the only muscle," says Apollo. "You're just...extra muscle."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Brother." Arianna cracks her knuckles and suddenly her voice is all business. "Dad wouldn't throw away anything from his 'glory days.'" The last words are accompanied by air quotes and a grimace.

"Like you don't keep books of all your club photos," scoffs Apollo.

Arianna rolls her eyes. "My girls are worth remembering." She pulls off her shorts and t-shirt to reveal a silver bikini; the metallic beads at the end of each string chime together as she jumps into the pool. Her head surfaces a moment later, and she continues to speak as if there'd been no interrupting splash. "We had the best meeting today. All my girls left knowing that boys ain't shit. Got more done than you two nerds did anyway."

She's not wrong. As Arianna swims laps around the scattered crowd of splashing, screaming kids, and Apollo resumes his position as a human solar panel, I replay the day's events in my head: Theo's desperate pleading, Mr. Naaji's exasperation, and Mrs. Naaji's suspicion. The only thing we'd found out for certain was that they were certainly working together, and that they both worked around dead people. But that didn't mean they'd killed anyone.

My father's voice screams in the back of my mind: *he's a despicable man who doesn't care at all about those working for him, and he will ruin the world in his attempts to conquer it.*

If I'd asked him who had reason to hurt Mr. Skylar, he'd have named the whole town. And he'd have put himself at the front of the list.

The sun is halfway to the horizon, and I've done nothing more than give myself a headache, when Arianna climbs back out of the pool and whacks me in the back of the neck with her towel.

"If you two quasi-detectives want to get to the bottom of whatever little mystery you've cooked up, then get it over with and go find dad's pictures," she says. "At least then you'll see if he even knows this girl."

"He doesn't let us in his office," says Apollo. Tall and handsome and with the sort of careless grace found in movie stars and high school rebels, Apollo does not look like the sort of boy to say something so innocent, but I have learned to believe every worried syllable.

"What he doesn't know," says Arianna, and her own voice is slow and irritated, like a parent explaining to a stubborn child again and again that two plus two is four. "Won't kill him." She lays out her towel and sits between us.

"I distract him, you sneak in. Easy." But when Apollo's eyes get wider, and he begins to chew at his bottom lip, she sighs, and amends, "I'll sneak in then. You don't have to do it."

Her words do very little to wipe the worry from his expression. When she speaks again, her voice is low and kind, and she reaches out a hand to touch her brother's knee. "It's for his own good," she reminds him. "If this red-haired chick and Mr. Reaper are trying to hurt dad, and we find it out first? That's a *good* thing."

Slowly but surely, Apollo nods.

Somewhere behind us, a child begins to cry. Apollo glances over to find the source of the sound, then turns back to me. "You'll come?" he asks.



I try to speak but manage only a nod before the child's crying pierces the air again, and Apollo's attention wanes. He stands up and spots the problem at the same moment I do. A few feet across the pool deck, a small boy with an afro and Spiderman swim-trunks stands frozen with a single flip-flop in hand.

Apollo crosses the small space between us and him and crouches to the boy's level. "What's wrong?" I hear him say, and the child rubs his eyes and indicates his missing shoe. A moment later, the two set off hand in hand to hunt it down, Apollo nearly bent in half so as not to tower over the child.

"Kids love him," says Arianna. She watches her brother search under a lawn chair for the missing flip-flop, and her frown intensifies. "He's too nice for his own good."

The kid has stopped crying. With Apollo as his protective shadow, he hurries around the pool, upending noodles, and floaties, and blow-up rafts. Suddenly, the pool feels like the safest place on earth, but there's a danger sitting between Arianna and I, a menace I don't have words for, a monster only she can see and I can feel. "What does that mean?" I ask.

"It just means that people aren't all rainbows and butterflies, Isaac." She picks at her pedicure, scraping off a fleck of silver nail polish to match her bathing suit. When she speaks again, her voice is falsely breezy; rather than comfort me, it leaves an awful buzzing in my chest that I'm too scared to shake out. "Don't worry about it," she says. She sounds just like a robot.

"What do you mean?" I ask again. "Is it Mr. Naaji? Do you know something?"

"No," she snaps then, with a sigh, adds in a forced calm. "No. It's not Mr. Naaji. Look, Apollo told me this hospice chick has been stalking you. And it's cool that you two could team up or whatever. He's missed you. Boy, you have no idea how much he's missed you." Her gaze

drifts back across the pool. The little boy and Apollo have found the missing shoe, and now the boy holds it up above his head, jumping in excitement.

“I hope you find out what that girl’s problem is, I really do,” says Arianna. “And I’m glad Apollo’s got your back and all for his stupid hunt.”

She stops again, and I wait. But when she doesn’t continue on her own, I press, “But?”

“But my dad’s not worth it, okay?” The words come out in a rush, breathy and angry and upset all at once, like a doll when the voice box has been kicked by a toddler having a tantrum.

“Arianna...” But her name is a sentence I don’t know how to finish, questions I don’t know how to ask.

“I saw him kissing some girl, okay? Yesterday. He was supposed to pick me up for school.” She laughs, but I’ve never heard a sound less amusing. “I don’t know what I expected. He never picks us up for school. He never does anything if there isn’t going to be a camera there. So, okay, I’m not surprised it was Mr. Driscoll waiting outside. Whatever. That’s normal. But when I call, he tells me he got caught up at work, right? He’s always caught up at work.” She focuses on her hands now, traces her cuticles and analyses the polish on each nail.

“Use my credit card, he tells me. That’s his *thing*. Sorry I missed your tournament; buy yourself a good-job present on my card! Sorry I couldn’t come to the Father-Daughter dance, how about a new necklace?” The words are coming faster now, tumbling out one after another. I wonder how long they’ve been waiting inside her, lining up behind her lips and plotting their escape. “So I went to the mall, just like he wanted. And there he is, sticking his tongue down some Hotdog on a Stick girl’s throat. It was disgusting. He cheats on her all the time, you know? Heather? All the time. He cheated on Mom with that nosy white woman and it still isn’t enough. Men are gross. Gross.”

Apollo and the little boy sit on a lounge chair across the pool, chatting with a woman who must be his mother. The boy crawls into her lap and puts both his shoes back on. I can't hear what they're saying over the din of the pool crowd, but Apollo's easy, happy expression is clear as day. The woman looks ready to hug him, her face aglow with appreciation and what I assume is a pleasant surprise that a teenager took the time to help at all.

"He doesn't know," says Arianna before I can ask. "Please don't tell him, Isaac. It'll kill him. He doesn't get it. Dad's a great check writer, but Apollo still thinks he's going to show up at our door one day and get us all to move in together. One big happy family. He still thinks he's got a daddy."

"But you don't?" I ask.

Finally, Arianna drops her hands to her sides. Flecks of silver rain down onto her lap from the broken polish. "Guess I'm the dark and cynical one," she says.

As Apollo leaves the lounge chair and makes his way back toward us in long, calculated strides, the Lost Shoe mother pushes a pair of water wings onto her son's tiny arms. She speaks quietly to him; whatever she says makes him laugh. Not once, not in any of my rare memories of her, did my mother ever look at me like that. Maybe it made you dark and cynical not to trust your parent, or maybe it just made you smart.

"Doesn't he deserve to know?" I ask.

"Maybe," says Arianna. "But he's my baby brother, Isaac. You don't get it."

"You're twins."

"I'm nine minutes older. Treat your elders with some respect, Boy." She grins but it's gone within seconds. "It's not my job to give him what he deserves. It's my job to keep him happy. And happiness ain't got nothing to do with the truth."

## The Skylar Heir

“And so Zeus took the maiden and handed her back to her mother. He set the open pomegranate into Hades’ palm and with a smirk, called out, ‘Have a good summer.’”

Paulina Harrison, *HAGS*

We arrive at the Skylar mansion just after six o’clock, when all of the normal work-day, secret-shift employees have gone home and Mr. Skylar sits alone in his office, pouring over checks and emails and his many business obligations. I knock on the door, but it takes him a full minute to look up. When he ushers me in with a single snap of his fingers, I say with a nervous anticipation that’s only half scripted, “Hi, Sir, I’m sorry, Mr. Skylar, Sir, but I noticed a mistake today on one of the charts. I was wondering if I could show it to you.”

Mr. Skylar raises an eyebrow. “A mistake? When did you see the charts? Those are private, Isaac.” He’s out of his chair and on his feet before I can answer. He strides across the office in a huff, suit jacket flapping behind him in his haste. I watch the worry—security pitfalls and lost money signs—flash before his eyes as he leaves the room and snaps me toward the basement.

He forgets to lock the door.

As I follow Mr. Skylar, I chance a look behind me and watch Arianna slip into the office. In the doorway, she pauses to shoot me a thumbs up. The plan is working.

Down in the workshop, Mr. Skylar spreads out the blueprints and asks me to point to the mistake. Only now, alone with my father's boss in the midst of a metal wonderland, with the airplane pieces—wings, and cockpit samples, and metallic wired frames—looming over me like giants, do I begin to doubt whether Arianna, Apollo, and I had truly thought this through.

Still, it's the most interesting thing that's happened in this workshop so far.

It is the first time I am seeing this map up close. Maybe it is this—the wide amazement in my eyes as I trace the equations, try to take in every problem at the speed of light, the realization that there is more here than I can possibly absorb in this moment—that gives me away in the end.

“Ah,” says Mr. Skylar. “I know what this is. You're feeling left out, aren't you?” He puts a hand on his hip, and for one awful moment, as he glares down at me, I'm sure I'm about to be fired. He will call my dad and give my secret internship away. He will stop the paychecks—not just to me but to my father too. He'll stop the scholarship. He'll ruin us, steal my father's designs all over again, and leave us with even less than the scraps we have now.

Then Mr. Skylar's awful face breaks into a wide grin, and he laughs. “I was just like you when I was your age,” he says. “Always trying to sneak my way into the adult's inner circle. Well that's alright. Boys will be boys, won't they?”

He claps me on the shoulder and sighs. “I guess I have been keeping you in the dark. You know what, you're right. You've been here every day, helping with this process. Your family is a vital part of this momentous undertaking. Starting tomorrow, you'll sit in on the meetings, alright?”

I'm not fired.

The words take their time absorbing into my buzzing mind.

I'm not fired.

I try to nod, but I'm not sure I manage it. The panic has hardly begun to disperse—a horrible rope knotted around my heart, now loosened with sloth fingers—when Mr. Skylar gestures around and sighs in ecstasy. “It’s beautiful, Isaac, isn’t it? All of this?”

He crosses the room and leans against the cockpit model. It’s a giant display, silver in color but no longer shining; it’s covered in the grunge of the lab, in the fingerprints of the dozens of workers who, day in and day out, alter its design to make it the strongest in the world.

“Soon enough, the sky will belong to machines. No more silly pilots, no more wasteful human error. The money it will save us in the long run.” His voice is dreamy, ecstatic.

“Machines don’t need time off. Don’t need sick leave and holiday pay. This is the future of the modern business. Isn’t it fantastic?”

At that moment, Arianna appears beside me and grabs my arm, saving me the horror of having to answer.

“Arianna!” says her father, eyes widening in surprise. “When did you get here?”

“I’ve been here all day,” she says, and the wink she shoots me is all I need to know why she’s lied: because he deserves it, because he’ll never know the difference, never really care where his kids are or aren’t, and that is his crime.

##

Apollo is waiting for us both in his room, staring down at a large pile of photo-albums like they’re a stack of dynamite. Arianna sits beside him on the bed. I squeeze in between them, eager to see what I’ve just risked my job to discover, but when neither twin reaches out to breach the first cover, I do it myself.

I flip the first book open—if the small, smiling faces staring up at us are any indication, it’s Freshman year of college—and scan past picture after picture of Mr. Skylar grinning arm and arm with a very tall Hawaiian man in board shorts and the sort of too-tight t-shirt Apollo would have approved of. “That’s Po‘okela Ka‘aukai,” whispers Apollo. “He owns...”

“I know.” I can imagine with vivid clarity the water resort on the far side of town. With enough boats to storm a small country, a water park for younger kids, and a beach side hotel, Mr. Ka‘aukai had made a water-side retreat that could rival Mr. Skylar’s aviary success. It’s only Mr. Naaji who wasn’t so lucky—the one member of their fraternity who drew the short stick.

I flip to the next page.

Finally, I find what we’re looking for: Mr. Skylar and Mr. Naaji, laughing over a kegstand at a house party where young people barely older than Apollo, Arianna, and me dance and drink and wave their hands at the camera. In the background, stuffed into the corner and looking like she’d rather be anywhere else in the world, is Theo.

Her hair is still fox-red in the photograph, but more incredible is her face; though her image is small and far away, situated in the very corner of the photo, her age is hard to miss. She doesn’t look a day younger than she does right now. While Mr. Skylar and Mr. Naaji have garnered wrinkles around their eyes, earned harder faces like weathered stone and their bodies have grown up and out, Theo looks identical to the woman we’d seen the day before.

But it’s the next photograph that makes Apollo’s breath catch in a small gasp, that makes my eyes feel like they’re bugging out of my head.

In a photograph of Mr. Skylar and Mr. Ka‘aukai posing, shirtless, on the grass of what looks like a college quad, Theo stands in the background, caught off guard, books in hand, and

her face lined and wrinkled and exhausted. Her hair is still bright, but her face is at least fifty years old.

Apollo's breath catches in a small gasp, but Arianna, who hasn't followed Theo like we have, nudges us both and asks, "What? That's what you wanted, right? She's right there!"

I can't speak. Too enthralled by the photographs to stop, I leave the explaining to Apollo while I flip through the book.

Photo after photo, they're always the same: Mr. Skylar, beardless and boyish-faced, grins up from every party, every football game, every toga-clad festival; his friends drift in and out—sometimes Mr. Ka'aukai, sometimes Mr. Naaji, though he begins to look surlier and surlier as the book continues, and soon, he disappears entirely. But when Theo surfaces, which is not in every picture, which is not even in most pictures, she always appears different: sometimes twenty-something, sometimes forty, sometimes looking as small and unassuming as a prepubescent little girl, but always in the background, scowling, glowering over at Mr. Skylar.

I don't know how long we've been looking—ten minutes, maybe twenty—when Apollo whispers, "She's a time traveler."

"Don't be stupid," says Arianna. "That's not real."

"But that is." I point at the oldest picture we've found and the wrinkles around Theo's frown. "How do you explain that?" I'm not sure if I believe in time travel, but between the dreams, and the falling, and the strange pictures I've seen in Mr. Skylar's eyes, very little surprises me anymore. At least I'm not the craziest thing in the room anymore.

Arianna shakes her head. "These pictures are really old," she says. "And far away. Maybe it's just a trick of the light."

"Or it's not really her," says Apollo. "Lots of people have red hair."



Neither sound particularly convinced by their own words, and neither stops me when I grab the second photo album.

In this book, near the last page, we find a picture that makes Apollo and Arianna freeze. Older than in the first book, though not by much, Mr. Skylar stands side by side with a woman who is not their mother and who is not Heather. Black-haired and pale-skinned, the woman holds tight to Mr. Skylar's hand with one hand, while the other cradles her swollen, pregnant stomach.

Like a clap of thunder, the door to Apollo's bedroom suddenly swings open. Apollo and I jump in surprise, but Arianna, in a skilled rush to make our new spy enterprise proud, throws the blanket over the albums and leans over them, as if she's been lounging across the bed the entire time. Mr. Skylar—the modern, living one, middle-aged and having traded in his fraternity togas for a crisp business suit—steps inside.

His eyebrows crease suspiciously. “What are you three doing?” he asks.

“Nothing!” says Apollo, his voice too high and too quick. I feel Arianna groan beside me, but by some miracle, she makes no sound.

“Well your mother is here,” says Mr. Skylar. “So take your nothing downstairs.” He's still frowning as he backs out of the room and disappears down the hall.

“What is your problem?” Arianna rounds on Apollo, slapping his shoulder with the back of her hand. “Nothing!” she mimics in the same squeaky tone while he swats away her hand like it's a fly.

##

Ms. Tallie drives me home, chatting animatedly the whole way about my life and my family, wanting to know what my father does for a living, and when she'll get to meet him.

When she asks about my own mother, Apollo leans across the car to turn up the radio, and Ms. Tallie slaps his hand away. But at least the subject is forgotten.

The silence in the backseat is suffocating. If I'm stunned by the fact that Apollo and Arianna might have a secret older sibling, it's nothing to what the twins must be thinking. They answer their mother's questions in monotone, leaving me to carry most of the conversation. Too stunned to think of anything more interesting to say, I spit out my "Yes Ma'ams" and "No, Ma'ams" on autopilot, my mind a million miles away, still trying to figure out how someone can be fifty one day and twenty the next. No anti-wrinkle product on the market could be that good.

The car pulls up in front of my house in a total and complete hush.

"We'll all have to get dinner sometime," Ms. Tallie calls through the car window as a I slip out of the vehicle and wave goodbye to the twins.

I nod, smiling politely, but I know my father will never agree to it.

When I come through the front door, I find him, surprisingly, in the front room rather than holed up in his workshop. He's slouched back on the sofa, his legs up on the coffee table, and a beer in his hand. He grins from ear to ear when I sit beside him and passes me the plate of pizza-rolls he's made for dinner.

"You've been working real hard on that summer homework," he says, glancing out the window to the darkened sky beyond. A guilty squirm ravages my stomach, and suddenly the pizza roll in my mouth tastes more like chalk. I chew to give myself an excuse not to answer.

"You know," he says. "You can tell me if you're off meeting a girl, right?"

My father's eyes crinkle around the corners, amused, and he ruffles my hair like I'm a little boy again. I think of Theo—the girl who is haunting my life and who I desperately wish

wouldn't. Then of Apollo, lounging across the pool deck. I shake my head. "No girl," I say, and stuff my face with more rolls. As long as I'm chewing, I don't have to lie.

We fall into a comfortable silence, eating and watching some black and white movie where trip-falls and pies to the face serve as the main entertainment. My father lets me drink a bit of his beer, and when we run out of pizza rolls, we order a real pizza, stuffed crust and everything.

Though the couch is made for three people, and though we never sit on the side where my mother used to, it feels just like old times, like there are no secrets between us, like everything is going to be alright.

##

Twenty-four hours later, after a long lazy Saturday of doing nothing but overthinking everything I've seen and wondering how Theo can possibly be a dream-entering, time-immune magical being, I sit with my father in the same exact same spot, watching the old movie's sequel. The back of the DVD promises double the trips and double the laughs, but before we can see if it's true, the doorbell rings.

My father looks anxiously at the clock above the television. It reads a little after ten p.m. "Maybe the neighbor's cat got loose again," he says. "Go get ready for bed." He pats my shoulder and lumbers toward the front door.

Knowing a dismissal when I hear one, I take my time gathering my backpack and tiptoeing down the hall to my bedroom, but even when I get there, I hover in the doorway, listening hard. My father never has people over, and never this late. If someone has come now, it must be for a good reason.

The door creaks open, and Milos 's cold, crisp voice echoes down the hallway and sets the hairs on the back of my neck on edge.

“It needs to be finished by the end of the week,” he says. “We’re running out of time.”

There’s a scramble, as if the man has tried to step inside, but my father stops him.

“It’s late,” he says. “It’ll be finished. But not tonight. Go home, Milos .”

There’s the scramble again, and I know my father is trying to shut the door. I can hear the old squeak—open and closed, open and closed—and suddenly, I’m immensely grateful that my father never had the time to fix the door like he always says he will.

“If it doesn’t work...” begins Milos .

I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing I am, imagining the news crews and whole of Skylar Air gathered to watch the first pilotless plane set off into the atmosphere, only for the engine to sputter out and fail us all.

“It’ll work,” says my father. “It’ll work. Go home.”

I know the rest of this story, know the anxiety of a big job on the line, have seen my father work his way through the process time and time again. It’s pre-Big Deal jitters, and my father is a veteran. I close the door to my bedroom and fall back onto the bed, checking my phone for any updates.

There are nine texts waiting for me.

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:23pm:** SOS

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:23pm:** Dad just got into a HUGE fight with someone from work

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:23pm:** We couldn’t see who it was but he yelled at dad for a long time

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:24pm:** Said he was going to get what’s coming to him

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:24pm:** That he’d set the record straight and then he stormed off

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:24pm:** Dad locked himself in his office

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:24pm:** We just keep hearing him breaking stuff.

**Sun King, Saturday, 10:24pm:** I'm following him. It's got to be Mr. Naaji. Are you coming?

**Arianna Skylar, Saturday, 10:25pm:** Get your ass outside. If I have to go, so do you.

My father knocks on the door and peeks his head inside. "You want to finish that movie, Kiddo?" he asks. I look between his hopeful face and my phone; three more texts pop up, all with the same message.

I'm needed at the mortuary.

"I'm not feeling good," I say. "I think I'm going to just go to bed." I tuck my phone under my pillow and lay my head on top of it.

My father nods and leaves, and I think: at least I'm not lying. As I gather what I need into my backpack—my sketchbook and a pair of binoculars—and scramble out the window, my stomach squirms uncomfortably. Not feeling good was an understatement. Guilt and nerves eat me up like maggots preying on my prematurely dead flesh. Because if I don't die falling off something tonight or get murdered by our local neighborhood body collectors, my father will certainly finish the job.

## Headshots by Hadi

“Make Man out of clay. Make him in shape and form like the Immortals, and I will breathe life into him. Then you shall teach him such things as he needs to know, so that he may honour the Immortals and build temples for us. And after a little time he shall die and go down to the realm of my brother Hades, and be subject to him.”

Roger Lancelyn Green, *Tales of the Greek Heroes*

I meet Apollo and Arianna behind the same dumpster where we’d been caught by Mrs. Naaji the day before, though this time it is miraculously deserted. The lights are on in the second story of *Epáratos Mortuary*. As I crouch behind the awful stench of spoiled milk and vinegar, I watch the lights travel, one window illuminated at a time; either Mr. Naaji and his wife are moving through the house, turning on and off lights as they go, or one of the ‘clients’ downstairs has set off on a ghostly night journey.

“We have to get in there.” It’s as one of the spirits has entered my body and pushed the words out of my lips. I don’t remember saying them, and yet they linger in the air between us, pushing, urging. I hold my breath until Apollo nods his agreement.

“That’s crazy,” says Arianna. With her face engulfed in shadow, it’s impossible to see what’s going on in her eyes, but I imagine they’re glaring daggers in my direction. Her crossbow is slung across her chest in its familiar suede bag; if we’re caught tonight by murderers, at least one of us has protection.

“Whatever Theo gave Mr. Naaji, it’s going to be in there.” I can hear the urgency in my own voice—desperate and pathetic—but I can’t stop it. “And maybe that’s what they’re planning. Don’t you want to see what it is before—before they can do it?”

I have no idea what ‘it’ is, but in my imagination, I watch the airplane crash a thousand times. The sensation of falling is one I’m intimately familiar with, and I wouldn’t wish it upon my worst enemy, let alone the parents of my recently-re-made best friends. But even as I convince myself that this hunt is all to help the twins, I picture going to sleep later tonight and dreaming of Theo with no answers as to why she’s there or why I’m falling, and—even worse—her stealing more bodies and lives like Mr. Torres just to keep me alive. And for what? The thought is so unbearable, actual tears of frustration well up in my eyes.

Then Apollo darts out behind the dumpster, ignoring his sister’s cries of, “Apollo! Apollo! You know the Black kids always die first in the scary movies!”

I follow him, keeping in the shadows and out of the orange glow of the street lights that just might give us away. A moment later, Arianna appears by my side, cursing steadily under her breath.

The door, unsurprisingly, is locked. I look between the twins—Apollo’s face glistening with anticipation and determination, Arianna with her phone in her hand, likely ready to call for back up at the first sign of danger. I wonder who she’d dial: the police, or her archery club? I’d bet my life on the latter.

I slip two paper-clips out of my pocket and straighten one; I bend the other into an L and get to work. Maybe I don’t know what to do at a funeral, or how to help grieving people, and maybe I’m no good at archery or sports, but I know what to do around a lock. Easy. It takes a bit

of wiggling back and forth, but when I get the tension right, Arianna lets out an impressed, “Daaamn,” and Apollo claps me on the shoulder.

“Where did you learn that?” he asks as the door slips open.

“My dad taught me. He was always really scared I’d get locked in somewhere.” Scared is an understatement. Maybe that’s why I’ve sometimes dreamed I’m chained away in a tower, all the doors sealed and nothing but ocean out the window and nearly a mile of empty air below me. “Come on.”

To say it’s dark inside the mortuary seems a repetitive notion, but it’s all I can think the moment we step inside. The floor is cold tile, and the world is dark. Arianna presses a button on her cellphone and lights up a few paces in front of us.

We stand in a long, barren room, flanked by a plain black door on one side and a (thankfully) empty shelf on the other. Both are labeled with biohazard warning signs, and the shelf stretches roughly the size of a body.

There’s a lump in my throat growing by the second as we inch forward, following Arianna’s light past another shelf that at first looks perfectly ordinary. It’s not until we get closer, nearly brushing against it, that I realize the shelf is really a stack of heavy wooden casket lids.

It’s the last image I see before a high-pitched growl breaks the air, then another, then another, and soon, three half-grown Pit Bulls are racing toward us, barking their heads off. In the dark of the morgue and with saliva dripping from their snouts, they don’t look quite as cute as they had out in the daylight, on a leash, with their owner to stop them attacking. I try to remember their names: Sir, Buster, Augustus—but before I can say a word, Arianna steps forward, her fingers extended, palm up.



Voices—too far away to hear properly—grumble upstairs, and there’s the sound of a bed creaking. Footsteps move above us then stop suddenly.

Sweat gathers on my brow, making the room seem hotter, smaller—like the walls are closing in. Beside me, Apollo stiffens, eyes darting from the dogs to the ceiling. But Arianna only crouches down. Something Apollo had texted days ago runs through the back of my mind: she had wanted to adopt a wolf.

Sir sniffs her fingers, while Buster makes a circle around her, nose pushing at her pockets, no doubt searching for food. Augustus stays where he is, body tense, but thankfully, mercifully quiet.

More mumbling passes above us, words that sound something like “come back to bed” or maybe “come back to me.” The footsteps move again, the bed creaks, and all is still.

I let out a deep breath just as Arianna finally coaxes Augustus onto his back for a belly rub. All three dogs have turned to putty in her hands, panting happily and nuzzling her for more pets. “I’ll be back, I’ll be back,” she assures them, giving each a last rub behind the ears before she stands up. “Sit. Be good boys.”

Back on her feet, she rounds on her brother and me. “I cannot believe this is how I die,” she hisses, spinning circles on the spot as if searching for the exit. Her phone lights up an unmarked white door. When she stops in front of it, animatedly shaking her head ‘no,’ I push it open myself and step inside.

I expect hanging bodies and grave stones, but all I find is a rather ordinary office. Unless you count the eerie blood red curtains that block out the only window, there is nothing strange at all about the room. It is sparsely furnished, with a black ceiling fan and a large, darkly wooden

desk, its chair hidden from view behind rows and rows of locked drawers. On its surface, six separate, neat piles surround the computer keyboard, each one a tower of brown folders.

“It has to be in here somewhere,” I whisper. My voice sounds terribly loud in the empty space. I move forward, one careful step at a time, and approach a wall of book shelves. The tomes are hardly organized, ranging from medical textbooks, to collections of Miwok history and mythology, to a Bible, a Quran, and a parenting How-To Book.

Arianna stops beside a rather dusty couch and the coffee table beside it. On its surface sits a Miwok basket, which she crouches down to investigate. “This is beautiful,” she says, then moves on to the shelf beside me.

Apollo stands at the desk, flipping through the folders. “They’re just paperwork,” he says. “Funeral bills and casket order forms and stuff.”

“But I bet this isn’t.” Arianna tugs another brown folder—this one dusty and wrinkled around the edges—from between two heavy books without titles. “Why do you think they were hiding this one, huh?”

A light flips on behind us.

Like flies in sight of a swatter, we scramble across the room. Arianna throws herself behind the couch, Apollo behind the desk, and I behind a pair of thick, floor-length curtains. I hold my breath, sure that I have never breathed so loudly in my life nor been so aware of the size of my body, of the rise and fall of my chest that sends the curtains fluttering around me.

Bare feet pad softly across the floor. I watch through two strips of curtain fabric as Mrs. Naaji enters the room first, holding a glass of blood red liquid and yet another folder in her hand. “You were right. They were fine. Though, have you noticed Buster has put on weight? Anyway,

the account will be fine,” she says, setting the folder upon the desk. She sits on top of it. “We can afford it. Give her what she wants. The funeral is in the budget.”

She tugs Mr. Naaji by the hand, and he enters the room, dressed in a checkered robe and tall, fluffy black socks. Neither he nor his wife, thankfully, think to look for a teenaged-sized lump in their curtains.

Then the fabric sways slightly from my own breathing, covering the crack and my line of sight. I don’t dare to move it in fear of giving myself away.

“You’re upset,” I hear Mrs. Naaji say.

“All these people, Posala. All these lives,” says Mr. Naaji.

The curtain swings apart again, ever so slightly, providing just a big enough crack for me to peer out of. The mortician runs a weary hand over a weary face and falls back onto the couch. A cloud of dust spirals up into the air and scatters through the room. “I don’t want their stories. I don’t want it all back.”

Mrs. Posala Naaji hums thoughtfully as she crosses the room and settles upon her husband’s lap. She moves with an enviable grace. As she gets farther and farther away from the desk—and farther away from discovering Apollo hiding behind it—oxygen reenters my lungs.

“Have I told you the story of this necklace?” Mrs. Naaji touches the beads around her neck, tracing the clamshell and shining abalone disks. “There once was a very beautiful woman who lived at the top of Sonoma Mountain.”

Something flickers in Mr. Naaji’s face, a familiarity and the beginnings of a smile. “Yes, I remember this woman,” he says, tracing the outline of his wife’s jaw. He cups her face in one large palm and kisses her.

There is something unmeasurably strange about watching two people be so happy, so intimate, while you wait like a fly on the wall. My heart does backflips in my chest as I wait to be found out, to be arrested. Or worse. Would they turn us in if they found us, or would they throw us into the body locker and fill our veins with formaldehyde?

“Stop that,” says Mrs. Naaji, nudging her husband away, though she too is smiling now. “You’re interrupting my story. Now, the woman was very beautiful, and she wanted to marry a handsome man she’d seen at the bottom of the mountain. So her father gave her a necklace, just like this one, but she did not think it was beautiful enough to win the affections of the handsome young man. So she threw it to the ground and it broke into many pieces. Her father explained that the necklace contained all the songs and stories of the mountain, and that if she had worn the necklace, it would attract the attention of everyone in the village, including the handsome young man.”

Mrs. Naaji strokes her husband’s beard, and he attempts a smile. It is the most exhausted sight I have ever seen. “But she broke the necklace,” he says.

“Yes.” Mrs. Naaji weaves her arms around Mr. Naaji’s neck. “So she placed the necklace back together, thinking only of her love, but when she paid attention to the beads and the shells, she began to remember the songs and the stories of each, and with so many stories and songs inside her, she could not be lonely, even when she was alone. But even when she’d put the necklace together, she could not find the clasp.”

“What did she do?” asks Mr. Naaji.

“She went to the Wise Women of her village, the elders, and told them how she had lost herself, lost her stories over a man.” She touches Mr. Naaji’s chest then his chin, nudging his head upwards. He smiles, truly this time. “They told her she must become the pendant. That by

singing her song and telling the stories of the mountain, she would connect all the stories, that she would be the pendant.”

“And what about that man she liked?”

“Well he was captivated by her stories, just like her father and the women told her he would be. And he offered her a basket to carry her necklace in which would hold water and reflect a rainbow off the beads, so when the people saw the rainbow in the sky, they would know she was coming with her stories. So she and her new husband travelled the world, making sure no one forgot.”

At this, Mr. Naaji lets out a long, low sigh and buries his face against his wife’s chest. She cradles his head and rests her chin atop his hair. It’s so quiet now, that even holding my breath feels too loud.

“We carry the stories together, Hadi,” whispers Mrs. Naaji. They begin to kiss, to hold each other in a long embrace that seems as if it will never end.

I stare at my shoes, then at the desk, and then at the couch. Arianna is in the belly of the beast, and if this goes on much longer, we’ll never get away. Apollo and I might be able to sneak past, to slip behind the couple’s back, but Arianna is hidden in plain sight, just inches away from this love-scene.

The longer it goes on, the more my face heats, until suddenly, horribly, an unbidden image of my father pops up in my head, asking me if I have a girlfriend. I try to remind myself of my own terror, that being caught is worse than being single, but the picture just won’t leave.

Finally, the couple rises from the couch, and as they walk out of the room, they flip off the light, immersing us—the three hideaways—into total and absolute darkness. We wait until

their footsteps disappear up the stairs, until we hear them clattering around above us. Then we scam.

We aim for the front entrance, but in the darkness, it's impossible to tell which way is which. I grab a handle and push just as the lights behind us flicker back on. I hear Mrs. Naaji say, "There was a noise. If it's another one of those kids...I swear there'll be more bodies in this place by morning. Keep the dogs inside, Dear. I'll be fine." Her footsteps are back on the stairs, getting louder, louder, louder.

Ariana's hand comes down heavy on my back, shoving me forward. I stumble out the door and into the open air. It's like reaching the surface of a lake when you're seconds away from drowning, like the smell of pines in the distance and the warm summer breeze on the back of my neck have dropped my heart back into my body. I am aware of my feet again, of my own wild breathing, of the twists and turns of my limbs and the stretch of my muscles as I race through the night.

It is only when I pass the first grave, when my hand touches cold stone, and I look down into the eyes of a carved angel, that I realize where I've taken us. This is not the street, not our path home, but the mortuary's back yard.

I have led us into the city graveyard.

The back door slides open, and Apollo throws me behind the nearest grave just as a yellow beam of light flashes across the yard and onto the exact spot we had been standing just a moment before. As the flashlight scans the cemetery, I stare over at Arianna, ducked behind a grave two feet over, her finger to her lips and her eyes intense beneath the moonlight. She still holds the mysterious folder under one arm.

Apollo's breathing is erratic beside me, his eyes wide and terrified. He stares at his sister, then at me, then reaches out and grabs a hold of my hand like it's the only life raft in a storming ocean. I remember being five, and six, and seven, and eight, and staring at the nightlight in the corner of Apollo's room during sleepovers. He had never been very fond of the dark.

The light turns off. The door closes. We sit in limbo, watching the house flicker, the lights traveling up, up, up, and then off. The house goes dark and quiet, and then there is nothing left but the three of us and a sea of graves.

##

We don't stop running until we reach the city bridge and a half-burned out street lamp. Beyond it, a single diner lights up the otherwise blackened street, its neon sign visible even from road. Though the streets have gotten rougher, the potholes deeper and more frequent, there is a comfort in knowing that just beyond this point, my home waits for me. Messy and small as it might be, at least it's familiar. At least there, I'll be greeted by the living.

I double over, grabbing a stitch in my side as I gasp to catch my breath. Apollo shivers beside me, moving closer to the street lamp. Its orange lights bounce off his golden eyes until they look more like flames.

Arianna sets the folder down against the bridge railing and flips it open. Huddled under the light, the three of us put our heads together and stare down at a collection of paper-clipped photographs and death certificates. Arianna takes off the paper clip, holding the photographs carefully against the summer freeze, and flips from one to the other.

Sepia turns to black and white, and the photographs get older, the quality fuzzier. But the images remain. Apollo's hand clamps down on my own, strong and solid and painfully tight. The pressure of it might be the only thing keeping me on my feet.

Collected in this folder, clear as day, are images of Mr. and Mrs. Naaji with their eyes closed, their bodies—sometimes mangled, sometimes clean, but always in their best clothes—lying on metal slabs or in white-sheeted beds. Sometimes they are surrounded by flowers, sometimes by letters or food, sometimes by nothing at all. The photographs are morgue pictures, memorial images, post-mortem photography. The photographs chronicle each and every time Mr. and Mrs. Naaji have died.



## Star-Crossed Dreamers

“As you tell me again, nothing will take you,  
 I see red tidal waves of fire crash  
 over your shoulders and your skin  
 turn white, the ash of your lips  
 and hands rising to kiss the wrists  
 of Andromeda and tug on the belt of Orion.”

Tina Togafau, *Your Hand In Mine at the Bottom of the Ocean*

“They’re vampires.” Apollo’s voice leaves no room for argument, which is just fine by me because even at the rate my mind is circling through explanations, I can’t come up with anything more realistic. Mr. and Mrs. Naaji definitely looked alive to me, had definitely talked, and walked, and almost caught us hiding in their creepy house, just like living people do. But in the photograph on top, there is a hole in Mr. Naaji’s neck, and nothing in the stack beneath it makes the sight any more comforting.

“She was drinking blood, remember?” Apollo speaks in a hushed whisper, but I can’t drag my eyes away from the deadly images long enough to see his face. But I do remember. A blood-red liquid in a normal, unassuming cup. Is she a modern-day vampire? A month ago, I would have said it was impossible, but now I’m not so sure. There is definitely something strange going on in this town, and vampires make just about as much sense as any of my dreams or the strange visions I had when Mr. Skylar looked me in the eye.

The street lamp flickers ominously above our heads. We push closer together and flip through the rest of the photographs. Something cold and horrible siphons through me, like I've been given an IV of liquid nitrogen.

Beneath the many dead pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Naaji there are more: Milos with a hole in his brain and once with purple bruises around his neck; a brown-haired woman I recognized as the owner of a bridal shop down the street; a few other neighbors I'd only seen in passing; and then, at the very end of the stack, Mr. Skylar. His eyes are closed, and he looks older than he is now—more white in his beard and lines around his eyes—but his features are easily identifiable. There is a hole, roughly the size of a bullet, in the center of his temple.

Apollo's grip on my hand is so tight, I lose circulation. I don't dare pull away, even though I'm sure I'm about to lose my fingers forever. Though Arianna doesn't say a word, I hear her breath stop. We are left in a horrible, empty silence, where before there had at least been the comfort of our out-of-breath gasps.

She slams the folder closed.

"It's a prank," she says. "Photoshop. They're—they're trying to scare Dad. That's the plan. To ruin the business. They'll scare him."

"Why did they keep the folder hidden then?" I ask. I'm no expert prankster, but I imagine scaring people involves actually interacting with them. Photographs taped to the Skylar's front door or slipped under the mat. Bloody letters scrawled on their garage. Not secret death certificates and hidden photographs.

Arianna opens her mouth to reply then closes it just as quickly. Her eyes lock on something behind my head, and without another word, she slides the crossbow off her shoulder, attaches an arrow, and shoots a silver-tipped arrow into the dark.

Apollo and I turn in unison to stare at the open road behind us.

In the distance, two yellow orbs appear out of the empty blackness, eerie and glowing, just like a pair of monstrous eyes.

While the air rushes out of my lungs and I freeze—stuck to the side of the road, powerless to defend myself—Arianna shoots another arrow, and then another. I’ve been picturing my death ever since the dreams began, but it’s never ended like this: eaten by a monster in the dead of night.

A car drives across the bridge a moment later, its headlights—two yellow spheres—flashing as they honk their horn in our direction. We have become the delinquents my father always warned me about. Apollo, Arianna, and I all stare at one another. It might have been funny—our paranoia, our massive misjudgment—if I wasn’t sure all three of us had the dead photographs glued behind our eyelids.

The car rolls down its window, and the driver—a thick-faced, dark-browed man with a large mustache—begins to yell curses in our direction. “I’ll call the police! If you dented my car, you little thugs better pray your parents have insurance!”

With no hesitation, the three of us take off, zero to sixty, sprinting across the street and toward the only other source of life and light left in this town: the diner.

“That proves it,” says Arianna as Apollo opens the diner door and we all shuffle inside. “There’s a reasonable explanation for everything.”

“You shot a car,” says Apollo.

“And I’ll shoot you if you don’t shut up! You made me think it was a monster!”

“I never said that. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

Their bickering only gets louder as we maneuver towards a table. This diner, unlike Harpy's, is cramped and stuffy, as though they've never opened a window or owned an AC. There's a single waitress, rushing between the two filled tables, and a boy of about eighteen at the counter, picking at a large pimple on the tip of his nose.

Apollo marches straight up to him and orders himself a coffee. When he looks to me, I nod, but Arianna shakes her head. "I want to sleep and forget about all of this," she says.

I admire her courage, but I'm sure that if I ever sleep again, it'll be a miracle.

Apollo must be thinking the same because as the coffees come out and he hands one steaming mug to me and gathers up an absurd amount of sugar packets, he whispers, "She's not going to sleep for a week. By morning, she'll have a whole itinerary of places we should investigate."

We take our seats at a little booth in the back. It's the perfect vantage point: the tall, cushioned seats providing a sound barrier to let us gossip in private, while the view of the diner remains unobscured. As I pour sugar packet after sugar packet into my coffee, I watch a man two tables over cut his steak into little pieces. "Is that rare, do you think?" I ask. "Bloody still?"

Apollo nudges my shoulder and then nods to a table behind the steak-eater. A girl with yellow hair and sunglasses, despite the late hour and despite being inside, sits reading a book, drinking nothing but a glass of red liquid.

"It's juice. You two are being ridiculous," says Arianna, but even she doesn't look so sure anymore. I watch her worry her bottom lip through her teeth, and when she reaches for the menu, her hands shake.

"I can't believe my dad is a vampire," says Apollo.

"He is not a vampire," says Arianna.

“That guy definitely has fangs.” I point my coffee cup at a diner guest near the door. The diner isn’t too well lit, and the coffee is already making my brain bounce around my skull, but I’m positive I see the man sink razor sharp teeth into his meatball sub.

I pour more caffeine down my throat. I’ve never drank coffee before, but it’s hot and strong, and makes the horrible, confused buzzing in my brain seem a little easier to bare. I drink until my throat is scalding, wishing I could replace every horrible thing I’d just seen, every cold inch of the funeral home and of the bodies in those pictures, with the heat of a thousand stars. I want to swallow the sun whole.

“So let’s get this straight,” says Arianna, putting forward one silver-nailed thumb. “This weekend we have learned that A, dad has some secret love child out there somewhere; B, dad at some point *died*; and C, half the people in this town are zombies!” The third finger she counts is her middle one. She drops the other two and pushes it into Apollo’s face before she groans and slumps back into her seat.

“Or maybe they’re vampires,” offers Apollo. He sips his coffee. “Or wizards.”

“Wizards don’t live forever,” I say. I had plenty of time as a kid to read *Harry Potter*, and no one there had ever lived forever just because they had magic.

Apollo shrugs. “Fountain of youth then.”

“But Dad—I mean, the people here don’t live forever either,” points out Arianna. “They regenerate. So they’re some sort of...sort of...” She picks up a packet of silverware and begins to tear at the napkin wrapped around a fork and knife. “Regenerating, immortal beings. Something with more than one life.”

“Like a cat,” says Apollo.

Arianna grinds her teeth and fiddles with the edge of her knife. “This is not the time for jokes,” she snaps.

“I’m not joking. Maybe we’re half cat. Sphinxes. Those are African.”

“So are zombies,” says Arianna.

Apollo grabs another sugar packet. I watch him pour it into a cup that is now more sugar than caffeine, and wonder, not for the first time, how he manages to look the way he does when eats like an unsupervised child. It’s easier to think of this—of my friends, and of actual human biology—than to wonder about my dreams and their visitors. Or worse, to wonder about me.

Mr. and Mrs. Naaji were supposed to be dead, and so was Mr. Skylar. And so was I. If Theo had saved me, maybe she had saved us all. So what does that make me?

“You think I’ll come back to life when I die?” asks Apollo.

“I don’t know.” Arianna points a butter knife in his direction. “You want to test it?”

Their arguing becomes a distant buzzing as I stare around the diner. I hear them—theories about aliens and angels and everything in between—but I also hear the slow, instrumental music playing from behind the counter and the sawing of a knife against a customer’s plate. I should take part in the conversation—I know I should. I should tell them my theories, but there’s a lump in my throat I can’t shake off.

Because perhaps Theo takes a life for a life, and maybe she took Mr. Torres’ for mine. Maybe she is a reaper after all. But I can’t say this out loud, can’t admit to my friends that maybe Theo and I are not so different, that maybe I’m responsible, complicit, that maybe there’s a reason she haunts me in my dreams, and maybe I can’t die because I’m one of them too.

When I tune back into the conversation, Arianna is saying, “—another sibling! We have another sibling! I mean, who was that lady? Who was that?”

“You know what this means?” asks Apollo.

Arianna’s napkin, ripped into tiny pieces, now resembles a pile of fallen snow as she says, “That the world is screwed?”

“That you’re not the oldest anymore.”

“I’m going to actually kill you,” says Arianna.

“Good luck. We’re half vampire. I’ll just come back.”

“I will stab you in the heart with a stake.”

“Make sure it’s rare,” I say.

There is a long, tense silence, and then all three of us begin to smile. It’s a small thing—hesitant and exhausted and nearing more on hysteria than actual amusement—but it’s better, at least, than sitting any longer in the suffocating fear.

I finish the last, bitter sips of my coffee just as Apollo points his fork at the steak-eating guest. “He’s definitely sucking the blood out of that steak. Humans don’t eat like that.”

The man in question might just be savoring his meat—his eyes closed as he takes his time on each piece—but I don’t argue when Arianna slams her menu down and says, “That’s it. We’re going home before we get eaten by a zombie, or a sphinx, or a mystical immortal, or our probably-vampire dad.”

##

There isn’t much to talk about as we walk; or, rather, there’s everything to talk about, and it’s impossible to decide where to start. I watch my shoes, wondering if my dad ever had any other kids, or—more likely—my mom after she left us. Did she have another family somewhere, a new husband, and a great big house filled with more people than machines? And what would I feel if I found out that she did? Would I want to meet them? Would they want to meet me?

We reach Ms. Tallie's house first and creep past the porch light to Arianna's window. "Are you going to be okay to walk home, Bird Boy?" she asks, pulling off the screen and sliding the unlocked glass to the left. She clambers inside as if it's the easiest thing to do in the world.

"I'll walk him home," offers Apollo.

"That's okay," I say quickly. "I'll be okay." If any of the city vampires come and attack me in the night, at least I'll go out with a story. I only hope they kill me quickly.

"Nah, I need the walk. And you need the company."

Apollo puts up his fist and Arianna taps it with her knuckles, saying, "Don't get killed. If you die, I'll kick your ass."

We leave her perched in her window and walk the darkened streets back to my house. It seems we are the only two souls awake, and if I let my imagination run away from me, I can pretend we're the only two souls alive. No monsters, no vampires, no zombies. No red-haired, body-collecting, possibly-immortal mysteries.

The streetlights on each side of us paint the world orange, and light Apollo's face a golden, ochre brown. "I'll race you," he says.

Suddenly, I have all the energy in the world. The coffee pumps through my veins where my blood should be, obliterating all other thoughts or worries. I feel like I can run a hundred miles, like I can compete for the Olympics right here and now. I nod, and just like that, we're off.

The streets become one single blur. There is no difference between me and the wind, between my feet and the pavement, between Apollo's body and my own. We are the summer breeze. We are uncatchable.



Apollo, always the faster one, reaches my house first. He tags the front steps and calls out, “I win!” while I collapse into the grass. My heart beats out of control, but, tired as I am, I’ve never felt happier. What a weird night.

Apollo hovers over me, grinning that impossibly wide grin, then offers his hand. As I stumble back to my feet, I stare between his laughing eyes and the house behind his head. The lights are off. For one horrible moment, my father floats back up into my memory. Did he finish the movie after I left? Did he sit alone on the couch, thinking me sick in bed?

Then Apollo tugs on my arm, and if asked, I’d be hard pressed to remember my father’s name.

Apollo leads me around the back of the house and begins to climb up the drain pipe.

“Where are you going?” I watch his tennis shoes rise higher and higher above my head.

“I’ve never been on your roof before,” says Apollo. “You’ve been on mine loads of times. I showed you mine, now you show me yours.” He winks, and my face heats up, zero to a thousand degrees in a millisecond.

“My dad doesn’t let me up on the roof...” I begin, but Apollo cuts across, saying,

“Because he’s scared you’ll fall. I know. But I won’t let that happen, Isaac Daredevil Hagar.” He extends his hand, and with images of the beach-side cliff running through my head, I’m powerless to resist. I grab hold, and his warm palm wraps around mine, our fingers interlacing. He tugs, and I follow.

The climb is not so difficult. We use the pipe as support, the window ledges as foot holds. Apollo goes first, showing me where to put my hands and where to put my feet, and I pick up the steps along the way.

At the very top, seconds away from success, my foot catches on the drain ledge, and I slip.

All the air leaves my lungs, like I've been socked straight in the stomach. The sinking sensation—the one I have become so intimately familiar with in my dreams—strikes again.

But this time I'm awake.

I brace myself for the collision, for the horrible splat.

But it never comes.

Apollo grabs me by both forearms and tugs. His arm slips around my waist, keeping my body close to his, and as one unit, we fall backwards onto the roof. I land on his chest, leaving us both winded. His grip on my hip is sure to leave bruises, and yet I am positive it is the only thing keeping me alive.

For a moment that seems to last an eternity, we lay there, gasping for air, the panic slow to subside. When I try to get up, I catch his eyes, and maybe it's the close proximity that makes it happen, or maybe tonight is just the night for the bizarre, but like with his father before him, I see whole new worlds.

Apollo on the roof becomes Apollo in a jazz club in the 1920's, singing on stage, *tell me, tell me, tell me*. The club blurs, tilts, becomes a Southern mansion under a Confederate flag. In the dead of night, Apollo packs his bags and hands Arianna a man's Northern uniform to match his own. "Cut your hair," he says.

I blink, and the world changes again. Apollo sits on a bed draped in silk, playing the harp. The music swirls through the air, beautiful and melancholy, until the door swings open, and a servant ushers him toward the banquet hall. Apollo smiles. "The bastards have been requested, have they?"

Then as quickly as it came, the vision is gone.

Apollo is sixteen again and staring up at me with a wide-eyed worry.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

I nod. He helps me down onto the roof, and I lay beside him. I think he’s speaking—I definitely see his lips moving—but all I can hear is the thud, thud, thud of my own heart.

“Would you tell me if you were a vampire?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “Of course I would. Would you tell me?”

I nod. Apollo puts out a hand, and I shake it.

“Are you actually afraid of heights?” he asks. “I should have asked. I just thought...”

“No,” I say before he can finish. “That’s my dad. It’s not me.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Are you?” I ask.

Apollo shakes his head. “I’m afraid of the dark.” In my neighborhood, there are no streetlights, and at this time of night, even the neighbors’ TV across the street is turned off, so no blue glow shines out the window.

“It’s not dark.” I take his hand, half expecting him to resist. When he doesn’t, when his fingers become clay in my grip, relaxed into my every touch, I direct his pointer finger to the stars. “The sun’s not gone. Look at all of them.”

“Guess my kingdom has competition,” says Apollo. He turns his head to one side and grins. His tongue, pink and wet, darts out between blindingly white teeth, and I struggle to keep his gaze. “You know the constellations?” he asks.

“Some,” I say.

“Show me.”

There are a billion stars above our heads and a billion stories to go along with them. I map out the normal pictures—Ursa Major and Minor, Andromeda and Orion’s belt—then stop on Lyra, the lyre constellation, and the instrument given to Apollo’s namesake in Greek mythology.

“That one, right there...” I point to the brightest star, right in the handle of the harp. “That’s Vega.” I tell him how Hermes strung a tortoise shell together and how he gifted the instrument to Apollo, how others see Vega as the Weaving-Princess star, married to a shepherd.

“I can only play the guitar. And the ukulele,” says Apollo, pulling his keychain from his pocket. He shows me the smallest ukulele imaginable, no bigger than three inches long and one-inch-thick, dangling next to his car keys. He strums a note. We both laugh.

“Vega, huh?” he says after a long minute.

“Fifth brightest star in the sky,” I say.

“What’s the brightest?” he asks.

“Sirius.”

“I’ll be that one.”

*I bet you will*, I think, but all I say is, “Cool.”

He tilts his head to the side. I count his eyelashes so I won’t get lost staring anywhere else. Like into his eyes. Or at his lips. He moves closer, and then a car alarm begins to blare down the street. We hear a man cursing, screaming drunkenly to the sky, and a trash can tumbles over.

“You can’t walk home right now,” I say, sitting up and locating my window just below us. “Stay the night.” It must be well past midnight, and even if my neighborhood was the sort of

place you could walk through this late without safety concerns, there are no street lights to guide someone who is afraid of the dark.

We inch down the roof and slip into my still open window. I start to lay out blankets on the floor, to offer Apollo my bed as he'd done for me, but before I can so much as blink, he settles down on my pillow and says, "We can both fit." His eyes close tiredly, he yawns, and then he blinks back up at me. "Is that okay?"

It's not okay, and we won't both fit, but I don't have the heart or the guts to say it. Nodding quietly, I turn the light on my phone and set it beside us—a makeshift night light—then settle into bed.

My bed isn't big enough for the bulk of Apollo's body. I don't take up much space on an ordinary day, but here and now, pressed so close to him I can count the muscles of his abdomen through his t-shirt, I feel like a giant. A stringy, poorly designed giant made by a god with no idea what giants should look like. I'm overtly aware of every limb: how long my legs are, and how there's no proper place to put my arms. I curl onto my side, facing the wall rather than Apollo. Though I can't see him this way—which is the point—I know the moment he falls asleep by the way my own tension bleeds out; his breathing becomes soft and even and quiet, and when I branch out from my limb cocoon, my leg brushing his legs and my arms brushing his arms, I manage, somehow, not to have a heart attack on the spot.

An hour passes, or maybe a minute—it's impossible to tell in this darkened, silent limbo—and then Apollo begins to stir. He shakes in his sleep, his head rocking back and forth, his brow arched, and mouth caught in a grimace. "No," he whispers. "No. Don't."

I reach for him, nudge his shoulder, but he doesn't wake. Not at first. I move closer. I want to wipe the frown from his lips, want to iron out the crease in his forehead, to scare away

whatever has him closing in on himself like the end is coming. I want to tell him that everything will be okay, but the only word that comes to my lips is his name. “Apollo,” I whisper. “Apollo!”

His eyes shoot open. My phone lights up just enough of his face that I can see his eyes, teary and lost. “It’s alright,” I whisper. “It’s just a dream.”

“I saw him,” he says. “My dad. He was...” He gulps. It’s a quiet, horrible sound. Watching Apollo frightened is like watching a lion run from a mouse, and I’m not sure I’m big enough, strong enough to protect him. I reach for his hand and squeeze. “He was a monster,” he says.

“It’s just a dream,” I repeat.

“What if it’s not?” His gaze tells me all I need to know. He’s imagining the photographs as vividly as I am. He’s imagining vampires and zombies and fountains of youth and mysteries that perhaps have no name at all.

*I won’t let you fall*, he’d said.

“I’ve got you.” I wrap my arms around him, feel him give a full-bodied shudder and rest his head against the crook of my neck. I don’t move, don’t dare to. I’d have even stopped breathing if I was able, just to make my chest a steady place for him to rest. An eternity passes, and then he snores and goes still, and peace falls between us, temporary as it may be.

##

Sleep comes slowly after that.

I find time to silently recite the helicopter flight manual and Mr. Skylar’s flying instructions, and even rewrite my own constellation story: a tale about a boy who hears music coming from the heavens and flies closer and closer until he gets caught in the web of stars and becomes a part of them. I don’t know when the story becomes a dream, when the music of the

lyre I imagine begins to actually fill the room, or when the room becomes a tower. Only, suddenly, the stucco walls of my bedroom become neatly stacked stone, and when I look down at my clothes—imagining the jeans and t-shirt I’d fallen asleep in—I find an old cloth toga instead.

My father stands behind me, pushing my arms one at a time into a metal harness. It is surprisingly light. When I flex my shoulder blades, metallic wings fan out to frame my scrawny body, a move so effortless, they might have been a part of me all along.

“Remember,” whispers my father. “Do not fly too high or the wax sealing the feathers together will melt and you will fall. Do not fall too low and dip into the water, or they will grow wet and the wax will fail to stick. Stay in the middle.”

The dream changes.

Apollo, not much older than he is now—sixteen or seventeen by the looks of him—and dressed all in white, kneels on the bank of a river, holding in his arms the broken, bleeding body of a young boy. The fallen teen—who looks more like me than I can bear, as if we share the same blood, as if he’s part of some family line I’ve never known—stares upwards, unseeing, from blank, bloodshot eyes. His neck is bent at the wrong angle, his back a horrid, inhuman arch. He is the perfect picture of what happens when you fall, when you don’t have gods to catch you, when the dreams finally end.

“You did this,” whispers Apollo. There are tears on his cheeks, but when he looks up, those golden eyes are unrecognizable from the boy I know, the boy whose eyes shine like the sun. This Apollo—giant and all-consuming in his rage—has eyes like a blazing supernova.

I turn to find the perpetrator, the unfortunate being on the other side of Apollo’s fury, and experience a shock so sharp, it’s like falling while still on solid ground. My stomach drops out from beneath me, and my voice gets caught in my throat.

Shaking, staring down at his own hands, is my father.

His face is horribly pale, and though his eyes, at least, are dry, they're wide and wild, and like Apollo's, so incompatible with the man I know. His hair sticks up in all directions. His clothes are ripped and dirtied. He looks mad, looks deranged, looks like a shrunken, ghostly version of the man he should be. "You must understand..." he begins.

"I must understand nothing!" shouts Apollo. "He was just a boy! An innocent boy!" He stands now to his full and considerable height, holding the boy in his arms like an infant. "You will pay for this. Mark my words, you will pay."

And then Apollo screams.

The world becomes one giant yellow light, a heat strong enough to rival that desperate sound, and I wake up, sweating, staring up into the very real, very young eyes of a sixteen-year-old Apollo Skylar. He says my name on repeat, a sound that hours ago, might have been music to my ears. Now all I hear is his ancient curse.



# 12

## Sunburnt

*“Apollo: I speak too. I command you to fear, and not make void the yield of oracles from Zeus and me.*

*Chorus: You honor bloody actions where you have no right. The oracles you give shall be no longer clean.*

*Apollo: My father’s purposes are twisted then.”*

*Aeschylus, translated by Richmond Lattimore, Oresteia*

“I’m alright.” I sit up in bed and rub the sleep from my eyes. Bright white sunlight streams in through the window, painting my pillow with its glow. Apollo is a brick wall before me: arms tensed, jaw set, worried eyes boring holes into my skull. For the very first time since we reconnected, I wish for him to go. His body is too big; each of his heavy breaths come at the cost of my own, and though I know it was only a dream, his scream echoes in my mind, too loud and too painful, and not at all what I wanted to wake up to.

I move up onto my knees and pull open the window. “You need to go.” If there’s hurt in Apollo’s eyes, I tell myself it’s because our adventure has come to a pause and not at all because my voice has taken on the same cold, clipped tone my mother used when she’d stormed out the front door. “My dad will be awake soon. He can’t see you here.”

Apollo nods and climbs over the window ledge and out of the room. His feet hit the earth, but he leans his shoulder on the sill and peeks his head back inside. “Call me later,” he says.

I know what he wants to talk about—dead couples come to life and his dad’s possible immortality and what Theo has to do with it all—but something in his eyes makes me think, for

one wild moment, that he just wants to talk to me. And I can't have that. I can't be buddies with the boy who cursed my father.

I nod tiredly, repeating the mantra in my head again and again: it was just a dream, it was just a dream, it was just a dream, it was just a dream. And for all I know, the curse doesn't exist, or isn't that bad, or has already been broken.

As I watch Apollo drift away into the morning sunlight, his profile becoming a dot in the distance, I almost believe it.

But then the door swings open and my father peeks his head inside, a goofy smile on his unshaven face as he says, "Let's go wild today, what do you say? Pancakes, eggs and bacon, the whole shebang."

##

*Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.*

I pad into the room, my hands in my pocket, to find a bowl of pancake mix already on the counter. My father hums cheerfully as he cracks an egg into the batter and begins to stir. "Why don't you start on the bacon?" he asks. I pull out the package and turn on the stove.

When I was young and my father had the same steady job to attend to each morning, we'd wake up together and make breakfast side-by-side. I'd drink juice and check over my homework; he'd drink his coffee and check over his designs for that day's creations. In all the years since then—almost a decade now—I have never found a better feeling than pouring my orange juice and dancing across the tiled floors as my father sang old rock songs at the top of his lungs.

It almost feels like that again now. My father nudges my shoulder as he pours the pancake batter into a pan and makes a circle too big for one person to eat.

“You’re awfully quiet,” he says. Sunlight plays off the wrinkles of his face, lighting up his cheeks until they shine. He looks years younger like this. He looks innocent.

“Just thinking,” I say, trying to ignore the buzzing in my pocket that signals a new text. And another. And another.

“About anything specific?”

“We don’t have any more eggs.” I hold up the empty carton with one hand and slam the other against my phone to silence it. Tapping the mute button might be the first time my nerves have ever done me a favor.

My father raises an eyebrow then smiles his big goofy smile. If he’d have looked at me like that during those childhood breakfasts, I’d have been sure the world was a perfect place. Now, as I struggle to smile back, I imagine him on his knees, sobbing his repentance. Soon, he’ll ask me who is texting, what ‘lucky girl’ is battling for my attention, and I don’t have the energy to keep up the lie. Apollo’s scream seems to have zapped the energy out of me. When he’d yelled like that, it could have broken every window in a ten-mile radius.

What was the punishment for an ancient murder? When had it happened? Had he meant to do it? Did my father really kill someone?

“We can skip the scrambled eggs, huh? Pancakes and bacon. That’ll do,” he says, and I know he’s right, know that we’ve certainly eaten worse, and I don’t care at all about breakfast, but I shake my head anyway.

“I’ll go get eggs.” My hand closes around my phone. My father, reaching into his pockets for cash, shoots me a knowing smile. Before he can ask who “she” is again, I take the five dollars he hands me, and I rush for the door.

I meet Apollo outside the grocery store. It's two blocks from my house and a thirty-minute walk—minimum—from his, but I'd have bet my life that Apollo never went home. He sits on the sidewalk, his face in his hands, yesterday's wrinkled, ruffled clothes falling around him in bunches, as if he's shrunk three sizes in one day.

When I sit beside him, his face smooths out, the wrinkles in his brow shooting upward, and his lips curving into a smile. "Thanks for coming," he says.

I fiddle with my phone, glancing at the texts, at Apollo's pleas to talk, but all that comes out of my mouth is, "We were out of eggs."

"Right." Apollo plucks a stray thread from the knee of his jeans. "I should go home. I know I should. I just..."

"You just don't trust your dad. I get it."

"What?" Apollo's head shoots up, his eyes wide and startled. "No. Of course I trust him. It's just...you know..." He tears out another thread, winds it around one of his fingers. "What do you say to some immortal being? Did he pass it on? Am I immortal too?"

He's saying more, rattling off questions and theories, but it's his first sentence that echoes in my head again and again. "You trust him?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

I chew at the inside of my lip. I know I should keep quiet, know it's not my place to say anymore, but my dad's goofy smile and Apollo's angry screams are at war in my head, and when I try to blink, it all cumulates into a single image: Mr. Skylar, grinning in his workshop, telling me the world has no place for pilots or employees, or anything but advanced, human-free machines.

“Because he’s a liar and a cheater.” I don’t mean to say it, but there it is, sitting in the air between us, and now that I’ve started, I can’t stop. “And if he really can’t die, then he’s been doing this stuff for-for who knows how long.” My father’s Minotaur design stands out particularly clearly in my memory. All summer, I’ve given Apollo the benefit of the doubt, but if he trusts his dad so much, then they must talk; there’s no way he doesn’t know the truth.

“What are you talking about?” Apollo’s blank-eyed expression holds the same sort of naïveté and blind trust he’d shown me when we’d first set off to find Theo. The whims of my dreams and his magic 8-ball had led us then. But this time, I’m not so flattered. This time, I’m pissed.

I don’t realize the moment I start yelling, only know that I’m on my feet, and staring down at Apollo from this height is like seeing him for the first time. He is small and weak and so self-assured, it’s a wonder his ego doesn’t explode right out of his body. “He stole my dad’s work!”

“Isaac...”

“No, Apollo. He did. And you know that. And he cheated on your mom with Heather. And now he’s cheating on Heather!”

Arianna begged me not to tell him, but why shouldn’t he know? Why shouldn’t he deal with the same truths we both already see? He is no younger than us—not really—and no one on Earth would call Apollo weak. He’s taller, tougher, richer, and if his father has done worse than mine, he’s more prepared to take it.

But is Mr. Skylar really worse? That little voice in my head—the one that sounds so much like my father—remains skeptical, and that’s the worst part. If my dreams were real—and

they just might be—then my father has killed someone, and even my conscience, made in his image and by his moral, can't prove that isn't true.

To say that sucks just doesn't cut it.

Apollo's face is unrecognizable: narrowed eyes and scowling mouth. He has never looked at me like this before, like he hates me, like he'd enjoy nothing more than to flatten me under his boots. He's on his feet now, and his hands are balled into fists at his side.

"You don't know what you're talking about." His quiet, deadly chill is far more frightening than my yells. We both know it, but I can't back down. "My parents had problems," he says. "But that's because my dad is busy. He's changing the world."

"No, *my* dad is changing the world. Yours is using people to get rich." And that's the truth of it. My dad has always tried to help people—to help *me*. He can't have killed someone. He wouldn't.

Apollo meets my words blow for blow. When he speaks again, it's with a yell that would have left me deafened if I hadn't already taken a step away from him. "That's not true!" he snaps. "You don't know him. You don't know anything about him."

"*You* don't know anything about him. How blind can you be if you live with him and don't see that?" The voice in my head is screaming for me to stop, to be quiet, to end this before I say something I'll regret, but it's not a voice I can listen to any longer.

"Oh. Right," I say. "You only live with him half the time. Because he left you. Just like he left your mom. Just like my mom. Wake up, Apollo."

"You think you're a real tough guy, don't you, Isaac? Maybe if you're such an expert on shitty parents, you should take a look at your own dad." Apollo doesn't explain any further, and I

don't ask. Though he might mean that my father can't keep a job or a wife, it's the dream that flashes before my eyes now. A crumpled body, a broken skull, my father's guilty eyes.

"I have to go." Clasp onto the single wrinkled bill in my pocket and wishing it could buy me a ticket very, very far away, I turn my back on Apollo and enter the grocery store.

##

"There you are." My father grins and tugs me into the house the moment I arrive on the doorstep. It's as if he's been waiting for me, as if no time has passed since I left; his face is a light with a big smile curling up to his ears. He has no idea that my whole world had just fallen apart.

He takes the carton and walks back into the kitchen, whistling a Queen song, and sets to work on two helpings of scrambled eggs.

I grab the stack of pancakes he's already made and the plate of bacon and set both on the table. Only once I've taken my seat do my eyes catch on the two extra chairs across from me. We have a table for four, the perfect nuclear family table: one mom, one dad, two kids. I wonder if I've ever had a sister in another life, but I've never seen one in any of my dreams, and I've never once dreamt about my mother.

My father brings the eggs, and we both help ourselves to as much breakfast foods as our plates can hold. We don't use silverware, just scoop our eggs onto our toast and pile bacon into our mouths. My father gets up for second helpings, pours more onto my plate. Crunching fills the room, rhythmic and too loud, like the growling of some ancient beast. And though my dad has struck up a conversation about work and how with this new salary we might be able to go on a college-scouting trip in the fall, I barely hear him. My stomach rumbles in hunger, but the bacon

tastes like ash in my mouth. I'm sure Mr. Skylar has never cooked breakfast for his kids a day in his life, but he's likely hired someone else to do it.

"Did you ever go after her?" I ask. "Mom? When she left?"

My father's toast slips from his grip and falls to the floor. "What?"

"Well you never talk about her. How come? You never called her? Wrote? Tried to get in touch?"

"Isaac, it's complicated." My father stands up from the table and grabs the fallen toast. As he throws it away, he says to the trashcan, "Your mother and I had our differences."

That was what Apollo had said about his parents too. But everyone has differences, and that excuse isn't good enough anymore.

"Like what? Like she didn't want kids and you did?" Her eyes linger in the back of my mind, but if they were blue or green, I can't remember. "Or she wanted a whole house and you couldn't give that to her?" I gesture toward the leak in the roof where water drips steadily from the ceiling and into a paper cup on the floor; though it hasn't rained in a week, the water just keeps coming.

"Isaac, that's enough."

I drop my piece of bacon onto my plate and stand up. My legs feel wobbly beneath me, like I've just run ten miles, or downed the bottle of whiskey my dad's only ever let me have millimeter sips out of. Apollo had said to take a look at my own parentage, and I'm doing it now, staring at the back of a man who has never done anything but try his best for me all my life, a man I've trusted more than anyone.



His hair is combed today, tied up in a tight, neat bun, so he hardly looks at all like the disheveled man in my dreams, and yet there's no mistaking him either: the same hunched shoulders, the same flushing skin. Is that fear that turns him red, or anger?

"Or maybe you did something, huh? Did something she couldn't forgive? Something bad? Like hurt someone?" I'm not proud of the words, nor the way my voice begins to shake. I'm sixteen, and I should know better than to believe in dreams.

My father's hand slams down so hard on the kitchen counter, the spatula—half a foot away and settled on the egg pan—vibrates up into the air and hits the tiles hard. I wait for him to tell me I've overstepped and that he's angry because he's a saint, angry because he's worked hard his whole life and never stepped a toe out of line, that I have no reason to accuse him. I wait for him to do anything but turn around with his hand on his chin, and say, "Isaac, there is so much you don't understand. So much you can't understand."

"Then help me understand. If it was an accident..." I take a step toward my father, but he shakes his head and points toward the hallway. His eyes are a million miles away. For the last sixteen years, I'd always seen in his face what his bosses and the papers used to say about him: that he was a mad genius. Now, for the very first time, I see only the mad.

He scrubs a hand through his hair, making it stick up in odd directions, wild like my dreams. "Not right now," he says. "Not today. Take your breakfast, and go to your room."

"Dad." I'm inching forward, telling myself that all the bravest people in the world have been mad, that crazy and genius go hand in hand, and that just because he hasn't said no to my accusations does not mean it's a yes. But innocent men don't run from answers. "It's you and me, right? I won't..."

“Damn it, Isaac, what did I say?” There is nothing in my father’s expression that I recognize. He is the mad scientist in every bad film, he is the horror before the repentance, the man who made Apollo curse his very being. He has never yelled at me before. I don’t know how to endure it now. How to stand, how to hear it, how to exist.

“You never listen, Isaac. That’s always been your problem. If you would just listen.” He squeezes the bridge of his nose, lets go, stares down at his shoes. “Why do you never listen?”

“I’m trying to listen.” The tension rises back up in me like a volcano, fire in my stomach and bile in my throat.

No one in this whole town makes sense; no one does anything at all but make life a thousand times more confusing, and being a detective is nothing like it was cracked up to be. I’m tired of being in the dark, tired of being lied to, tired of having more questions than I have answers, tired of having two empty chairs at the table because my family is fractured and my friends are nonexistent.

“I’m listening right now!” I yell. “You won’t tell me anything! Did you kill someone, Dad? Did you?”

My dad’s face is closer to violet now than it is red. Anger has turned to shock—but is it because he’s been caught or because he has no idea what on Earth I’m talking about?

“Isaac, I have not...” He clears his throat, sighs. “I have killed no one in this life nor the last. I don’t know why you’d even say that. I know our life has not always been perfect-”

“Perfect? We have government cheese in the fridge. The mailman drops off our letters with an apology. It’s falling apart!”

“It’s coming together,” my father corrects me. “I’m fixing things. This new position...”

“Which was my idea!”

“Which was your idea. Yes. I know. And it was a good idea. This new position is doing us good. We’re on the rise, Isaac. I promise you.”

But the only rise I want to be on is in a plane a million miles away. I want to touch the clouds and watch my father and Apollo and this whole town become a dot beneath me. I’m tired of being an ant while other men get to live like gods.

I push my breakfast into a napkin and fold it up like a knapsack. If my father wants me to leave, I’ll leave. If this were a fairytale, if we really lived in a magical town full of vampires and zombies and sphinxes and red-haired, life-saving fairy-godmothers, the hallway would turn into a secret portal and take me away from this town. That magic—meant to save the hero from a horrible fate—would drop me into the warm living room of my mother’s cushy cabin, and she’d take me in her arms and feed me home-cooked meals and say she’d never meant to leave, that she’d been stolen away by some horrible troll.

But this isn’t a fairytale, and I don’t know my mother, and when I storm off down the hall, the only glowing portal I pass is the shining machines of my father’s workshop and their high-tech future.

When I reach my room and flop down onto the bed—which feels very large now that I am alone, and very cold—I find three missed calls on my cellphone, none of which are from Apollo. Arianna’s name glares up at me over and over again. I shove my phone onto the nightstand, tug the pillow over my head, and scream into the mattress.

Something solid and pointed hits me in the nose.

I sit up and untangle my sketchpad from my sheets. I don’t remember taking it out of my backpack, and all at once, ten separate thoughts come flying into my brain: did Apollo take it out? Had he looked at the pictures? What had he thought of them if he did? Did he like them?

And how many had he seen? Just the sketches of airplanes, or the pictures at the back too, the ones of the sun?

Then I remember that he probably hates me, that he doesn't know half the things he thinks he does, and that the lousy sketchpad had been a gift from my mother anyway, and no matter what my dad did or didn't do, she'd left me too.

I rip the first page out, feel every fiber tear under my fingertips, and it feels so good, I rip out the second one too. Before I know it, I'm sitting in a pile of paper balls and shreds of paper, my hands gray from all the charcoal and pencil I've torn to smithereens, and an empty journal in my lap. If I could have ripped through the leather, I'd have torn the cover too.

##

I hardly sleep that night. Scared of what I might dream and too busy replaying the day's fights over and over in my imagination, I forget to practice my flight steps and instead spend hours staring at the ceiling. Then a wave of fitful, interlocking nightmares take hold.

In the first, I stand at the window of a stone tower, staring down into a rocky sea. *"Don't fly too high," says my father. "Don't fly too low."* The world shifts, rolls over, and I sweep the floors in a charcoal drenched factory, whistling a sad tune in key with every boy around me. Then, suddenly, I stand in a meadow, locked in ray of sunlight and a pair of strong arms.

I wake up, sweat on my brow, to the sound of my phone ringing. Again. Groaning, I press the answer button before I realize what I'm doing.

Arianna's voice explodes across the line, angrier than I've ever heard her. I hold my cell a few inches from my ear, as she yells, "So now you pick up. I can't believe you, Isaac. I can't believe you. What good did you do, huh?"

I bite my lip. "He was going to find out eventually..."

“Oh, I don’t care about the cheating, Isaac! Yeah, he was going to find out. We all find out our parents suck and the world sucks. But why’d you have to be the one to tell him? Why are you in such a hurry to make the world dark?”

“You think the world’s dark.” I look out the window, half expecting rain to come lashing across the glass just to match my mood, but as if to taunt me, bright yellow sunlight filters through the blinds. I pull them closed as tight as they will go. “I just told him the truth.”

“You really think Black boys can go through this world not knowing the truth?” Arianna huffs angrily on the other side of the line, but I’m pretty sure I hear a sob between her words. “Apollo cried during Church, Isaac. Church. Now Momma thinks he was just moved or something and found God, and she’s making us go out to brunch with the congregation. Apollo is joining the choir! It’s an all-girl choir, Isaac! And they...I mean, damn, I might have to join the choir...” Her voice drifts off, suddenly dreamy and distracted.

“Are you calling to tell me the church choir is pretty?”

“No.” She clears her throat. “I’m calling because you have no idea what you’ve done, do you?” She sniffs away the tears I know she’d never shed in front of me. “You just don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“How hard it is to have hope! You know how many times we have to open a paper and see that pretty little white family grinning at us like we don’t even exist? We were first, but we’re still the afterthought.”

She stops, takes a deep breath, then says, “All day at all my meetings my girls and I talk about what we have to fight, and the changes we’ve gotta make, and that’s a good thing. And I was excited when Apollo started this little search party with you because he was opening his eyes, seeing outside of his little rose-colored world.”

Arianna pauses, and I'm not sure I ever want her to continue. If she stops there, I'm not the bad guy; I'm just the boy who dragged her brother down in my quest to fall, and maybe we're all better off without pretending we can fly.

"But you know what?" Arianna snuffles once, and then her voice grows very strong and very bold as she says, "I *like* living with someone who thinks he can do anything he sets his mind to. That actually thinks the world is going to let him. That's going to end. It always does. Someone is going to take it from him. Why do you have to be the one to do it? He's smart, and he's kind, and he's good. He's the damn sunshine of this family. Don't you dare try to put out that light just 'cause you've got storm-clouds you haven't dealt with yet."

There's a beep, and the line goes dead, leaving nothing but static in my ears.

## A Winged Messenger / Rest in Pieces

"Listen, it's not like I don't get it about  
suffering being relative—I get it. Not so much  
the traces of ice on the surface of four days'  
worth of rainwater in a stone urn, for example,  
but how, past the ice,  
  
                        through the water beneath it,  
you can see the leaves—sycamore—where they fell  
unnoticed. Now they look suspended, like heroes  
inside the myth heroes seem bent on making  
from the myth of themselves; or like sunlight, in fog."

Carl Phillips, *For It Felt Like Power*

Because Arianna still has the death pictures, and because I destroyed my sketchbook, I'm left to draw the bodies from memory on the inside cover of an overdue library book about the first pilots in South America. Somehow, drawing X's through the eyes of my neighbors doesn't bring me any comfort.

Twenty-four-hours ago, I would have called up Apollo and asked him about hospital procedures—like if anyone had ever survived a bullet to the head. Or I could have asked Arianna just how much she really knows about Photoshop. But with no one left to share the mysteries, and no intel backup, I throw the library book onto the floor and spend the rest of the weekend secluded in my room, buried under every blanket I own.

My soundtrack comes from all the sad CD's I stole out of the garage two years ago. The cases, which hadn't been opened since my mother hit the road and my dad played their music on repeat, were dusty and covered in cobwebs, but the tunes—slow, classical, and excessively long—are exactly what I need to cocoon myself beneath my pillow and pretend the outside world doesn't exist.

But the world just won't go away.

Though I have thrown my phone somewhere under my bed, and though my father hasn't been up to check on me all day, the sun still glares into the room, breaking through even the heavy curtains I'd hoped would keep it at bay. A bluebird sits on the sill, pecking, pecking, pecking endlessly against the glass. As I roll onto my side away from it, playing over in my head exactly how to fly Mr. Skylar's helicopter and my eyes shut tight against the light, I pray, for the very first time, to sleep.

##

In a lesson on being careful what you ask for, I open my eyes—maybe a minute later, maybe an hour—to find I am no longer in my bed, but walking through a pitch-black cavern, following the path of a weaving river. A bluebird follows me around every bend, cooing softly. His cries echo off the stone walls and send ripples from bank to bank.

The water is gray—and glowing. Not blue, not clear, but gray: a bright, glowing gray-green, like the world's most disturbing night-light. As the bird flutters above my head, I tiptoe closer to the river's edge and reach out to brush my fingers against its eerie, unmoving surface. Because how can I not? Only, I'm not the only one at the water.

With a splash, something solid with thick, human fingers, juts out from the gray abyss.



The hand that wraps around my wrist might once have been brown, but it too is tinged with grey now, as cold and lifeless as the water around it. As he grips my hand, squeezing at my pulse as if to make it his own, Mr. Torres lifts his head from the water, heavy drops of it cascading down his grey-black beard and pooling on his quivering lips.

“Find...” His voice is more breath than word, a horrible gasp, a moan, a hiss. “Wake. Wake. Wake up.” Above, the bluebird bird screeches.

I thought that knowing I was asleep would have help with the awful dreams, would take my fear away and make me unbeatable.

I was wrong.

Even my bones have begun to shake, rattling under my skin as I stare in horror at Apollo’s dead neighbor, at Mr. Skylar’s former employee. Mr. Torres’ brown eyes bug-out beneath his overgrown hair, too wide for any human; he has already started to decay, to become more skeleton than flesh. It’s so much worse than seeing him lowered down in his casket. So much worse than his wake. I can hear his wife crying, but this time, she’s inside my head. And her tears are on my cheeks.

He grips tighter, bony, solid fingers digging into the soft spot between my thumb and wrist. “Wake,” he says. “Wake. Find. Wake.”

“I don’t know who killed you, Mr. Torres,” I try to explain. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

He grips tighter. “Find. Wake. Wake. Wakewakewakewake.” The words won’t stop, won’t slow down. Every second brings them closer together, slurring into a single, echoing syllable: “Wakewakekwakewakewake.”

Mr. Torres’ jaw drops off. I wish, desperately, that that were a metaphor. It’s not. The bone crumbles, snaps. It tumbles into the water and sinks down, down, down, until the glow

absorbs it, until it is too deep to ever get it back. His hands—which have turned to bone, no skin left on his now smooth white fingers—tighten and pull me closer.

Sweat pours down my forehead. A single splash hits the water's surface, upsetting the ripples of the bird's song. "I'm sorry, Mr. Torres. I don't know what to do," I say, shouting now to be heard over the bird's incessant cawing. "Was it her? Did she kill you? Was it Theo?"

Mr. Torres doesn't answer. I'm not sure he can. He tugs, and I tumble.

Head first, I slip into the water, the icy gray soaking through my shirt, my pants, through my skin. Skeletal hands wrap around my ankles. The hands tug.

I wake up, screaming, hot tears on my cheeks as I stare around my empty bedroom. Aside from the moonlight filtering in through the blinds, the room is completely dark. But the bluebird remains. He rests his head against the glass and taps, taps, taps, unaware that the sun has gone down, and the time has come for him to go.

##

I arrive at the cemetery a quarter after ten o'clock. After all my adventures with Apollo, it was easy to sneak out, and after sixteen years of navigating alone, it's even easier to pretend I don't miss him by my side. After making a show of taking my dinner up to my room and daring daggers at my father, I slipped right out the window.

Though I have never been scared of the dead, there is something inherently unsettling about walking into a graveyard at night. The moonlight illuminates only a few inches in front of my feet, and only the tops of the graves, so it seems as if a few hundred rocks are simply floating in a black, endless lagoon. There are no lights on in the Naaji house.

I use the light of my phone to locate Mr. Torres' grave, though I hardly need to see the name engraved on stone to know that it's his. The ground around it is still fresh: no grass and no

flowers; they have not had the time to grow, but they have been left behind. Dozens of them—marigolds and roses—are scattered across the ground and propped up against the grave. Cards too.

Cards with children's handwriting.

Did a grandchild leave them? I wouldn't know. I never met Mr. Torres.

I sit down in front of the offerings, but it doesn't feel right, so I scramble up onto my knees instead and bow my head. It's not a prayer, but it is an apology. The problem is, I've never done this before. I've never spoken to the dead.

"Dear Mr. Torres," I begin. But that doesn't feel right either. "Uh. Hi. This is Isaac. You didn't know me. But maybe I stole your soul. Firstly, you should know that I didn't mean to. I really didn't." Not that he has any reason to believe me—if dead people can believe anything, that is. If I was him, I'd have haunted me too.

"I'm sorry for bothering you. It's just...I had a dream about you. I think it was a dream. I hope this isn't a dream."

The marigolds haven't wilted yet, and it's their color—bright orange in the midst of so much darkness, so much gray—that tells me this world is real. But it's not much to go off of. My whole life feels like a dream: mysterious strangers, confusing visions, dead people come back to life. And friends that disappear as quickly as they come.

"I don't know if Theo did it," I tell Mr. Torres. He doesn't respond. My knees have started to ache, but I don't move. I stare at the engraving of his name, remember what Arianna had said about the power of speaking names out loud. "I met your wife, Mr. Torres. She's really nice. She misses you a lot."

“They talked a lot about your smile. They said you were a really happy guy, and you made a lot of other people happy. I’m sorry I never got to meet you.” If it hadn’t been for the picture of Mr. Torres at the funeral—a giant, grinning photograph of a middle-aged man with strips of white in his beard and a smile like a young boy’s—I wouldn’t have recognized him in the lake of bodies. But he wasn’t smiling in my dreams. And even the picture had been stained by his widow’s tears.

“I don’t know who hurt you, Mr. Torres. I don’t know if it’s my fault. I don’t know anything.”

Again, no answer. I try not to feel too sorry for myself, thinking about how no one will ever answer me, how my mother left me with more questions than I can count, how my dad has lied about everything, how Theo keeps running into the sunset, shushing me at every turn, and how Apollo—sunshine that he might be—keeps himself locked in the dark. I imagine Arianna telling me that self-pity isn’t a good look, but she isn’t here. And it’s dark. And I’m alone. And I hate it.

“I’m sorry you died,” I say aloud. “I am. It must really suck.” I bite my lip. What a stupid thing to say. “Sorry. That was stupid. Of course it sucks. Sucks. That word sucks. Uh. I just mean, well everybody really misses you, and I wish I could solve your murder. You deserve it. To know what happened. For the world to know what happened. I think your wife would want to know. I wish I had something to tell her. But I don’t know. I’m just not a very good detective.”

The quiet is insufferable.

Without anything else to say, and wishing I’d never said anything at all, I rise to my feet, thinking I might as well go home. I can get back in through the window before my father realizes

I'm gone. I can finish listening to all the sad albums, and maybe tape my eyes open so I never fall asleep again.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Torres," I say one last time. It seems improper to add: *I hope you don't get stuck in an endless river, dragging down living boys and trying desperately to get out.* So I settle on, "I hope you rest well. I'll bring flowers next time. I promise."

I turn to leave, but at that moment, the bluebird flutters down onto Mr. Torres' grave. Or at least, some bluebird does; I can't tell one from the other, but I've got a gut feeling that this is the same one, the same nocturnal creature that had followed me into the underworld.

That, or I'm completely losing my mind.

With a great shake of its wings, the bluebird rises into the air and flies across the yard.

I should go home.

I should go home, but my feet don't listen. I follow the bird, thinking not only of the dream with the river, but of the one before it: of Apollo's anguish, of my father's sins. There's no good reason that the boy should be here, and I know it's impossible, that whatever murder might have happened—if it happened at all, if it wasn't just a horrible nightmare—happened years ago: thousands and thousands of years ago. I don't know how I know, only that I feel it in my gut; that version of Apollo and that version of my dad aren't from this time. Not from this town, either.

But still, as the bird soars above the graves, as I follow behind in the light of my phone, I search for the name. For my name. For Hagar.

Was he a cousin? An uncle? A brother? The body Apollo had cradled in the dream looked so much like me, it was almost like looking in a mirror.

I scan my phone light against one stone after the other, reading the names we had passed by before—Atropos, Lamia—and new names too, ones I had not seen the day of Mr. Torres’ funeral: last name Thomas, a husband and wife; a twenty-year-old named Camryn Martin; a child named Millie Brooks.

New and old, their dates aged and almost unreadable or recently carved, the gravestones seem endless in the darkness, but there is no Hagar here. No cousin, no brother, no long lost anyone. Not even a mother.

Then the bird settles on a worn but not so ancient grave near the back of the cemetery, very small with only one year and one date written across it. It is the grave of an infant, a soul that lived no more than a day. The name reads Emilio De Los Reyes.

A long minute passes—a minute where I don’t dare to breathe, where the bird relaxes its wings and coos softly into the night—where I wait for the light bulb that should be appearing above my head. But the name never gains any meaning, and the bird never directs me to a solution. It only sits there, waiting, as if it has brought me to some great gift.

“Who is Emilio De Los Reyes?” I ask.

Again, the bird chirps. It waits.

“I don’t know who this is.”

I’m sorry the boy has died—even looking at the grave has warms sinking and squirming in the pit of my stomach—but I don’t know him from any other grave in the yard. I don’t know what he’s supposed to mean to me or how he connects to the mysteries of this town. If he does at all. Is he related to Theo? To Mr. Torres? To the Naaji’s or Mr. Skylar? Did one of them kill him too?

“What are you trying to show me?” I ask my messenger. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to see.”

Anticipation has built up inside me like a tsunami, wave after wave of hope and fear and curiosity that all threaten to drown me at any moment. This summer has stretched on too long, been made of too many mysterious: all questions and no answers.

The bird chirps uselessly again, and I begin to understand why some people stuff them. “Can you just shut up?” I snap. “If you’re not going to help, then just shut up.”

The bird cocks its head to one side, silent. Useless. Totally useless.

“If you won’t help, just go!” I’m breathing hard, trying to keep my voice low, to remember I’m in a graveyard in the dead of night. But the longer I stare at the bird, and the longer it sits there, doing nothing, the more the heat rises in my chest, climbing up my lungs and firing out, “You’re just a bird, aren’t you? Just a normal stupid bird!”

But the bird doesn’t answer because it’s just a bird, and I’m an idiot, searching for signs behind every pulse and everything with wings. With a disgruntled ruffling of its feathers, the bluebird rises up from the grave and flies away. The night hides its path, making it impossible to tell where it’s gone, but it doesn’t matter. I’m done following.

I stomp across the yard and take a seat on the nearest bench. I turn off my phone light. I wish I could turn off my brain.

In the dark, there’s no way to mistake anything for a sign, for an answer. In the dark, not only does Mr. and Mrs. Naaji’s house not exist, but neither do they. Here, there is no sun pointing me in the wrong direction, no bright red hair to work as sign-post. Even when my eyes grow used to the dark, there’s little to see: just stones and grass and company that won’t talk back.

Several minutes pass, though I can't tell how many—maybe five, maybe fifty—before my phone lights up and brings the world back into focus. A text from my father reads: Be home in twenty minutes or you're grounded. You don't have to talk to me, but you do have to be safe.

I reread the text five times. But with no more meaning to decipher from those rather straightforward words, and with no grave to prove my father ever hurt anyone, I tuck my phone into my pocket and walk home, thinking that maybe, just maybe, some dreams are just dreams.

##

By Monday morning, my father and I have buried the hatchet. Over a breakfast of bagels and cream cheese—the good stuff, brand name this time—my father leans back in his chair until the front legs leave the ground. He says, “How's that summer homework coming along?”

“Not too bad,” I reply through a mouthful of cream cheese. “Should be finished this week.”

“That's good,” he says. “I'm really proud of you for working so hard.”

I smile. “Thanks, Dad.”

And that's that. We don't need apologies, and we certainly don't need to pick at old scabs when we're so well-versed at the medicine of Forget It Ever Happened.

But Apollo is another story. I've been so stressed, I've nearly forgotten I still have a job, and yet I'm still expected bright and early Monday morning, and work just isn't the same without my phone buzzing out of my pocket each hour.

Not that I'm lacking in things to do. With the launch scheduled for this Saturday, everything is coming together now, and because it has to be perfect, and because Mr. Skylar is prone to checking in on us each day and barking orders, the engineers have worked themselves into a frenzy. I bring each worker close to five cups of coffee a day—minimum.



But Mr. Skylar didn't lie completely when he'd said I'd get an inside look at the project. When he invites me to the sample launch Thursday afternoon, I nearly jump out of my skin in excitement.

Witnessing the launch is like taking part in a top-secret operation. We drive in unmarked trucks to a field in the middle of who-knows-where. During the long, two-hour trip, in which Fergus and I share a car with Mr. Skylar, and the operations managers follow behind us, the driver stays as silent as the grave, never so much as glancing into the backseat.

I suppose if I was rich and important like the Skylar family, I'd have been used to this sort of automatic servitude, maybe even grateful for the peace and quiet of an interrupted drive, but as I'm just me, I choke on a thousand questions I have for the man. Does he know what's going on? How long has he been driving for? Does he know where we're going? And how familiar is he with the past millennia? Has he ever seen anyone alive that shouldn't be?

But any questions I might have on who is and who is not immortal in this town are quickly shot down by a mental firing squad, and they're all voiced by Arianna. *Photoshop. They're—they're trying to scare Dad. That's the plan.* The photos were fake. They had to be. Because immortals don't exist. My dreams don't tell the future, and they don't tell the past.

They don't tell anything.

I repeat the mantra until the car pulls to a stop on the side of the road. There are no markers here, no sign posts, and no other cars for miles. I follow Mr. Skylar across a dry, dirt-strewn parking lot where I stand beside him, Fergus, and their five burly security guards. We cover our eyes and stare off past a cloud of dirt and smog.

Then the plane in front of us—an unpainted and unpolished but otherwise perfectly ordinary looking aircraft—roars to life.

“In three...” calls Mr. Skylar. “Two...One...”

The plane surges forward, races across the deserted track, gaining speed as it goes, and then the nose lifts up into the air. The wings follow, and then the tail, until the whole metal giant is soaring into the sky, up, up, up, and into the clouds.

Everyone on the ground—even the rough looking security guards, who I’ve never seen so much as smile before—break into cheers and applause, and Mr. Skylar clamps his hand down on Fergus’ shoulder.

The boy throws his fist up into the air, yelling, “We did it!” and the two hug, tight and familiar and the perfect image of a father and son duo. Apollo, I note, has not been invited to our launch party. Arianna’s voice whispers somewhere in the back of my mind: *We were first, but we’re still the afterthought.*

I turn my gaze away, and instead force a smile up at the sky, watching the plane grow smaller and smaller, then bigger and bigger as it circles around and makes its decent. It worked. Mr. Skylar’s dream plane—his human-less future—is a success.

## In-Human Form

“This method acting might pay our bills, but soon enough there'll be a different role to fill...So free up the cheaper seats. Here comes a Greek tragedy.”

The Wombats, *Greek Tragedy*

I'm still thinking about the plane—how easy it had lifted off the ground, and how much I wanted to be in it—when Mr. Skylar arrives in the office the next day to announce that my father is coming to present the final security protocol. Mr. Skylar shoots me a meaningful look, and I pack up my things without waiting to be dismissed. I'm sure Mr. Skylar couldn't care less if I get grounded, but he does care about my father; if he catches me here now, so close to the launch day, and if he quits in a fit of rage, the airplane project will lose its head of technological security and all of Mr. Skylar's peace of mind.

I slip out the front door.

It's a bright, sunny day, and with August just around the corner, the early summer storms seem a distant memory. Every day now comes with blistering heat, and if it stays this way—cloudless and calm—the launch will go off without a hitch.

At the end of the block, a familiar face with braided black hair sits behind a pop-up booth. The sign in front of it advertises free flowers. As I grow closer, Mrs. Naaji's face comes swimming into focus. She's sweating, holding a bouquet of roses in one hand and a water bottle in the other.

“If it isn’t The Brains,” she says. Mrs. Naaji sets down the water bottle and wipes her forehead with the back of a gloved hand. Thick gardening sheers sit by her elbow along with a few pots of water. Purple and orange Asters stand tall and proud in one, while the other is stuffed to the brim with Bellflowers.

Every voice inside my head says to distrust Mrs. Naaji. But then she smiles.

“Here,” she says, grabbing a handful of marigolds and tying a ribbon around the stems. “If you’re going to keep sneaking into the graveyard at night, at least bring something. Have some respect, won’t you?”

My cheeks blaze. “You saw me?”

She nods. “All that yelling? You weren’t exactly stealthy.”

I take the flowers, feeling like I’ve swallowed the sun. Had she been watching me the whole time, standing in the doorway of her house, laughing at the lonely boy who screamed at a bird?

“Why are you giving these out?” I ask, if only to change the subject.

“Sales have been a little low at my shop,” says Mrs. Naaji. “And these ones won’t be good much longer. There’s just no sense in throwing them out if someone might want them.” Her voice is cheery, airy, easy. When she speaks like this—not yelling, not spitting out threats—she doesn’t seem like an accomplice to murder. She doesn’t seem like a vampire or a sphinx either. And she definitely doesn’t look like a zombie. I can’t spot rotting flesh anywhere.

I thank her for the flowers but don’t get the chance to say any more because another neighbor—a short, stout woman with curly gray hair—steps up to claim her free orange Marigolds. As I take a step back, cradling the marigolds in one hand, Mrs. Naaji calls out, “Hey, Brains! Take this.” She holds out a single purple Aster. “This one is for you.”

When I take the flower, no thorns pierce my hands, no poison leaks out of the pedals and drops me where I stand. If she's a murderer, she's the nicest murderer I've ever met.

I wave goodbye—or at least, shake my flower-filled hands the best I can—then set off down the street. I try to think: *this is proof. The Naaji's didn't do anything, and there is no murder, and you are no detective.* But as I thumb at the Aster's pedals—the star flower—the stubborn little voices in my head can't help but wonder if several centuries of reincarnated life-stealing simply makes you an excellent liar. Maybe the flower just seals the deal, letting me keep Mr. Torres' life for good. How long will I live? A hundred years? Two? Will the guilt always feel this heavy?

"Sorry," I whisper to the Aster, then I pluck off a petal. *It's real.* I pluck off another petal. *It's not.* I remove the petals one by one, slow and meticulous. *It's real. It's not. It's real. It's not.*

The petals make a purple carpet, trailing behind me as my legs move on autopilot and take me straight to the graveyard.

It's just as well; Mrs. Naaji was right about the flowers. Though they haven't begun to wilt just yet, their orange color is lighter than it should be, the green of the stems turning brown at the bottoms, and they need to be dropped off ASAP.

I push open the cemetery gate with one hand while with the other, I pluck off the last petal. *It's real.* Apollo would have called this a sign, would have consulted his magic 8-ball for cosmic back up. But Apollo isn't here.

Mr. Torres isn't any more vocal, but his grave—which has been recently dusted off, old flowers taken away—is sun-lit and whole when I arrive. No skeletal hands reach up out of the soil. I place the marigolds at the stone's base.

“Have a good day, Mr. Torres. I hope there’s a good party or something in Heaven today.” I’m not sure that I believe in Heaven—or if parties would even be allowed if there is one—but I know I can’t leave without saying something positive. Mr. Torres deserves a good time, if only while he waits to see his family again.

In the daylight, the cemetery is not so frightening, not so cold. If there are ghosts—though I can’t see any—they pose no threat; family members walk between the stones to locate their loved ones, place flowers on the graves, cry and speak. If the flower is right—if my dreams are real—then the people they speak to are floating miles beneath their feet, stuck in a river of souls.

And that’s why it can’t be real. That’s why I can’t believe. It just doesn’t make any sense.

“You think I haven’t been trying? Talking to that boy is like talking to a brick wall.” The voice floats across the yard—a not-so-hushed whisper from a hunched, pajama-clad man several yards away.

A tall, white-haired woman stands in front of him, her arms crossed. “Try harder,” she says. “All your chirping hasn’t gotten us anywhere, and time is running out. Theo thinks—”

“I know what Theodora thinks,” says the man, and my legs turn to lead.

I creep forward, moving behind the thick base of the cemetery’s central oak tree. I peer around the trunk to see the pajama man’s very disheveled face and mess of electric blue hair. It sticks up in every direction, as though he’s never brushed it a day in his life and lives in a perpetual state of bed-head.

He yawns so loudly and so aggressively, it makes the white-haired woman frown and look up to the sky in exasperation, as if she’s spent years—centuries even—putting up with the

same ordeal. “Take a nap, why don’t you?” she snaps. Up close, it is clear that her white hair is no indication of age: her face is as young and wrinkle-free as a college freshman.

“Ha ha,” says the man. “He’s taking up all my energy.” His eyes roam across the yard and land on my tree. For a moment, as his eyebrows crease, I’m sure he sees me, but I can’t do a thing to stop him. Running isn’t an option. I’m frozen to the spot, staring into his face.

The sleepy man has the same eyes, the same button nose, the same cheekbones as Theodora Abe.

“Yes, it must be so very difficult for you, dealing with one teenaged boy,” says the white-haired woman. “Handling this whole town has been a vacation for me.” Her voice is dry and deadpan. “I told you it was too early to show him what happened. He wasn’t ready.”

“Well he was moving so slowly. The painting wasn’t getting us anywhere. I didn’t think they’d fight over it,” says the man.

“Humans are very sensitive over their parents. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t throw a fit to defend Erebos.”

The man scoffs. “I would not.”

As he stares off across the graveyard and the woman taps her foot impatiently on the ground, my brain short-circuits just one millisecond from imploding. *Humans*. Why had she said humans? Since when did people refer to each other that way? Or use that word like it was foreign, like it was an other? The mantra I’ve spent the last week working through—that the universe makes sense, that nothing is truly suspicious in this town—sounds feeble now even in my own head. It’s only by gripping tight to the tree that I’m able to catch my footing, to keep my heart from thundering out of my chest and overshadowing the conversation.

Suddenly, the pajama man's face wrinkles up, and with no regard for anyone else in the yard watching, he reaches between his legs and scratches his crotch. "This form is so itchy. The anatomy makes no sense at all."

The woman slaps his hand away. "I have told you not to do that in public. Especially not here. Your sister would—"

"What? Kill me?" The man smirks.

"I wish. Come on. She's clearly not coming." The woman grabs his arm and leads him toward the gates. "She must have fallen asleep again. This job is killing her. You could throw her a nice dream once and a while, you know?"

As they go, bickering in hushed whispers—I catch only the words "girlfriend" and "biased" and "last time"—the sleepy man adjusts the strap of his backpack. Because it is only half zipped, as though he'd given up or grown lazy halfway through closing it up, a book flops out and lands in the dew-covered grass. It's thicker than the bible, but smaller too, its pages ripped and frayed, the cover half falling off.

I wait until the gate slams closed then race across the yard, carefully avoiding stepping on any graves as I go. The mourners all around me turn to stare, but I don't care. I don't care if I'm the strangest boy they've ever seen, if even the ghosts are laughing at me now.

I stare down at the book. The title reads: *Ancient Greek Stories: A Collection of Myths, Histories, Poems, and Lore*.

With that thump, thump, thump, thump, thump going haywire in my chest, I stare at the book, then at the gate, then watch until the two figures become nothing but shadows—ants disappearing down the street. My hand is wrapped tight around my pocket, fingering my phone.



Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. A week ago, I wouldn't have hesitated, would have already been racing after them, texting Apollo on the way.

But would he answer now? *I didn't realize they'd fight over it.* It's crazy—and probably a little narcissistic—to think he was talking about Apollo and me, but I can't help but wonder: if this pajama-wearing man can send visions—to me or some other poor boy out there—what is he keeping locked up in his backpack? What secrets has he actually written down?

And what does any of it have to do with ancient Greece?

With a frog in my throat, I lean down to pick up the book and am suddenly overwhelmed by the biggest yawn of my life. It's as if all my limbs have turned to lead, and my eyes are bowling balls, too heavy to stay open. I have never before felt this tired, felt like my body can't hold me up any longer. It seems a miracle my neck has kept my head upright this long.

I drop down onto the grass and lay my forehead against the book, which in that moment, might be the most comfortable pillow in the world.

Within seconds, the cemetery disappears.

I'm flying, miles above the ocean, carried effortlessly through the summer breeze as the wings on my back flutter back and forth. They are not of my body—made of metal, feather, and wax—but I feel at one with their presence. I flap my arms, and they help me soar higher; I aim toward the water, and the wings carry me in an effortless descent. My toes touch the waves, and then I'm rising again, up, up, up, my hand above my head, reaching for the sun like it's a ball I can catch and tug down to earth. Its heat beats down on my wings, and hot wax begins to seep through the feathers, falls onto my bare arms and singes my hair.

I fall.

My stomach plummets as I hit the earth, but somehow I land on my feet, shoeless and perched on cold stone. In servants' clothes, I peer around a castle's column and watch Mr. and Mrs. Naaji preparing a body on a stone slab. They lay coins over the eyes and Mr. Naaji whispers, "The memories. They make me weak." Mrs. Naaji rubs his shoulder and rests her head upon it.

"But they are good," she says.

"Not all of them," replies her husband. "Not in the spring."

Mrs. Naaji looks up, and her eyes catch on mine. I begin to run, but she is faster.

The dream shifts again. I stand with Apollo in an endless field of poppies, their golden petals aimed toward the sky. A cannon blast echoes in the distance. A woman with mahogany skin and my mouth appears before us, her arms outstretched. She speaks Spanish, yells words I cannot comprehend. A lightning bolt careens across the sky, and beside me, Apollo tugs on my hand, and whispers, "Come with me."

I wake up in the cemetery grass, panting as if I've just run a mile, and holding the story book to my chest. A group of mourners stand over me, foggy, faraway voices asking if I'm alright. My nod is the biggest lie of my life.

##

My father arrives home only five minutes after I do, whistling the same Queen song he'd started during breakfast so many days ago, the song that says he's in a tremendous mood. His smile is wide, his eyes overjoyed. When he settles on the couch beside me, he leans over, pats my knee, and says, "We're going to make it, Buddy."

I grin back. I'd tried theater only once—a third grade play where I'd thrown up on stage, right into my Pilgrim's hat—but eight years later, I might as well be on the red carpet. Because

my mind is buzzing, and smiling is the last thing on earth I feel like doing, if I'm even managing it at all. *This form is itchy*, I think. *Humans are very sensitive. He wasn't ready.*

I say: "Presentation go okay?"

"Better than okay!" My father claps his hands together, rubs them like a praying mantis, like he's cooking up the world's best idea. "Tomorrow is going to be a great success."

"I'm really proud of you, Dad," I say, my stomach squirming in a guilt as heavy as the book in my bag. We're both celebrating a job well-done tomorrow, but only one of us knows that this success runs in the family. All the things I should tell my father—that I've lied all summer, and that this town has been taken over by aliens or dream-controlling immortals—war in my head with everything that I can't; because if I do, he'll never trust me again. And if I tell him all I believe, all that I can't seem to convince myself is my imagination, he'll think I'm crazy.

But when he pulls out a pizza menu and lets me pick any movie on On-Demand, it becomes hard to think of anything but the rumble of my stomach and my father's contagious, hopeful happiness.

## By the Book

“A dreadful sound troubled the boundless

Sea. The whole earth uttered a great cry.

Wide heaven, shaken, groaned.

From its foundation far Olympus reeled

Beneath the onrush of the deathless gods.”

Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*

Saturday morning—the biggest day in my dad’s career, and what just may be the launch of mine—comes bright, early, and fairytale perfect. The sky outside is blue and cloudless, the sun rising in a effortless arch across the horizon. It’s the perfect day to launch a plane.

And I’ve never felt lonelier. It’s like I’ve woken up as an oversized slug: oozing despair and operating at 2% energy.

I crawl out of bed, dress in my best white button down and black slacks—clothes I know won’t embarrass my dad or Mr. Skylar—then slump into the kitchen with the Greek story book tucked under my arm. After left-handedly pouring myself a bowl of plain flake cereal (and adding two sugar packets over the top), I sink down into the nearest chair to eat and read simultaneously.

The introduction is dry, a breakdown of the author’s intentions: myths in simple language, English translations, and a promise of pictures to come, images to interest “younger audiences.” I shift through the text, yawning; those pictures certainly aren’t found in the beginning.

My father walks into the room two minutes later, dressed in a suit—which I have never seen him wear before—and pours himself a bowl of cereal, also with his left hand, while his right is wrapped around a bundle of printed papers.

As he reaches over me for the milk and a handful of sugar packets, I spot his messy handwriting under several lines of computer code. He is checking his security system, the Minotaur, for the last time before it's too late.

“What are you reading there, Kiddo?” He ruffles my hair, and I feel like I'm five years old and on my way to kindergarten. I almost wish I was. Things were so much easier back then.

I show him the cover. I think I see something shift in his face—some of the color leave his cheeks, and his eyes widen—but it's gone in a blink of an eye, a panic I am sure I've imagined.

“This man at the library recommended it to me.” It seems an easier story to tell than: a possibly mythical being dropped the book, and then I fell asleep on the book, so I think I'm destined to read it.

“Didn't you already study that in school?” he asks. He sits beside me.

I push the book closed and nod. “A little.” I stuff spoonful after spoonful of cornflakes into my mouth, gulp, and then say the words that have been spinning around my head all week, “What do you do when you really mess up?”

“Isaac...” He starts, but I push on, pointing my spoon at him like a paparazzi's microphone.

“Just asking for a friend.” I think of the body in Apollo's arms, but thoughts of the dream-Apollo only lead to thoughts of the real Apollo. With Arianna's voice ringing in my head, the vocal overlay to a montage of Apollo's sad, pouty lips and his downcast eyes, I stab my

spoon back into the sugary milk. “When you do something that you really feel bad about. I— well, what do you do?”

My father sighs. Like me, he wiggles his spoon around in the milk, gazing into his bowl as if it holds the secrets of the universe. “There are things, a long time ago, I wish I hadn’t done. But they’ve all led me here.” He reaches out and pats my shoulder. “Whatever it is you’re worrying about, you must know I’m so proud of you. So, so very proud.”

The milk bowl has become a crystal ball. I swear I see my secret internship staring up at me from the depths of its brown-white surface, and I’m suddenly wishing I’d poured with a less heavy hand. I force a smile and stuff more flakes into my mouth so I won’t have to speak.

It’s only when my cereal is gone and I’m still seeing flashes of all my dreams like the world’s worst Previously On episode, that I mumble, “Do you think we’ll go to heaven?”

My father does the last thing in the world I’d expect: he laughs. Though he’s never taken me to a single day of church, and though religion has never played a part in our lives, I stare up in surprise. I’d found three saint candles in the garage and a crucifix. If we aren’t religious now, he certainly used to be.

“I don’t think there’s a heaven, Kiddo,” he says, standing up and taking both our bowls to the sink. “I don’t think there’s a hell either.”

He’s quick to clean the dishes, and I can see in the line of his shoulders that he’s itching to leave the room. He gathers up his papers, his briefcase. “Life is more than enough to focus on.

“Look, I’ve got to head out now. I’ll meet you at the launch site, alright? Big day ahead of us. Today, your dad’s gonna’ make you proud.” He squeezes my shoulder, but I don’t feel any more comforted. If anything, the world seems ten times tenser, and my heart pounds even harder.

While I stare at the book of Greek stories, my father makes his way toward the front door. He stops with his hand on the doorknob. "Punishment and reward are a part of life, Isaac. And the gods make sure we feel it all long before we die. You have to live your best life while you're here, that's all."

I sit up a little straighter, a million new questions fluttering through my mind. My father has never said anything about there being gods before. Is that why he'd looked so nervous when he saw mythology book, because he believes it's all true? Were there beings he was afraid of angering? Before summer started, I had little interest in what I couldn't see, but now that I know I live in a town full of the undead, gods don't seem so far off.

Before I can ask anymore, the front door slams closed, and the house goes quiet.

I flip through the mythology book, excitement renewed, but the beginning is no more interesting than it had been before my father came in.

I'm just beginning to wonder if the sleeping man wasn't magical at all, if I'd only fallen asleep because the tediousness of the text was contagious, when I make it past the introduction, and the Author's Note, and the Preface, and find myself staring at a giant, shadowy figure with glowing red eyes, charcoal for skin, and feet the size of killer whales. The caption beneath the image reads: *Titans, the deities that parented the Olympians.*

I read on, outlining the page with my finger. *The Titans were the children of Uranus (heaven) and Gaea (earth) and included: Coeus, Cronus (their leader), Hyperion, Iapetus, Mnemosyne, Oceanus, Phoebe, Rhea, Tethys, Theia, and Themis. When Cronus heard a prophecy that said his son would overthrow him, he did everything in his power to prevent it, but fate was not to be overcome; his youngest son Zeus dethroned him in the Titan/Olympian war.*

There's a tension growing in my stomach—a giant, growling knot I can't explain. Any hopes I have that turning the page will quell it fall dead within seconds; on the second page, larger than life and towering over the Earth, is Zeus, the lightning-wielding sky god, dressed in a white robe on a blue background to match his blazing blue eyes. He's a cartoon, an illustrated portrait at best, but the moment I see those blue eyes shimmering down in their earth-shattering vengeance, I'm reminded of another master of the sky. I'd seen lightning shimmer in his eyes too, seen that eerie blue glow every time I was left in *a room alone with him*.

*Gods*, Mr. Skylar had said. *The Greek Gods. The gods would lose their minds for those frisky wood nymphs. Always up to so much mischief. Drove Zeus crazy.*

Zach Skylar appears vividly in my imagination, and behind his head, the giant painting, just like this one, just like this book: the gods in all their glory. Before now, I'd never imagined it could have been a self-portrait.

*As the god of the sky, weather, thunder, lightning, law, order, and justice, Zeus is the king of the gods and the ruler of Mount Olympus. He is often depicted with a lightning bolt, and his sacred animals are the eagle and the bull.*

Back at the diner, Arianna had called our townspeople “regenerating, immortal beings.” Gods certainly fit that bill.

I can hardly breathe as I turn the page and find myself staring at a painting of a young man with blue flames for skin, haunting black eyes, and a three-headed dog at his heels. Behind him, an eerie green river seems to flow forever, winding into an endless darkness; drifting along in the water are screaming grey-green souls.

*Hades is the king of the underworld and the dead, often pictured with his three-headed dog, Cerberus. He is the oldest of the gods and brother to Zeus and Poseidon. When deciding how*



*to divide up the world, the three brothers drew lots; if Hades truly lost to the luck of the draw is up for debate, though many scholars believe his two brothers cheated to receive their preferred territories. Hades has never forgiven his brothers, and the three hardly ever get along.*

Beside Hades stands a woman with deep brown hair, flowers tied to her brow like a crown, and a pomegranate in one hand.

*Hades' wife and queen is named Persephone. Persephone's mother, Demeter, the goddess of grain and harvest, did not approve of the union and demanded her daughter be returned to her in the living world. Persephone knew that if she ate or drank anything in the underworld, she would have to stay there forever, so when her mother demanded she return and Hades offered her a blood red pomegranate, Persephone looked him in the eye and ate six seeds. It was then decided that she should live six months of the year in the underworld with him, and six in the living world. This is how the seasons came to be, as the months when Persephone is beneath ground (Fall and Winter) are cold and there is little life; when she rises to the living world, she brings spring and new life with her.*

Mr. Naaji may have traded in his cloak of flame for knitted sweaters, and the caption may call his wife Persephone, but I am sure that the couple in the painting is Mr. and Mrs. Naaji. The painted woman doesn't look anything like the Mrs. Naaji I know—their eyes are different, and this painted woman is paler, her lips redder, her hips wider—but I know. I know, finally, certainly, that the Aster flower was right. *It's real.*

I know it like I know that my dreams are true, like I know that my surviving that fall at the start of the summer was no happy accident. Like I know I've finally found our answer. Not vampires, not zombies, not sphinxes—gods.

I flip through the pages until the book opens, nearly on its own, at the very back of the book, in a section titled “Minor Gods.” Forced between the pages is a square Polaroid picture. On the bottom, written in a very untidy scroll, are the words: *wake up*. The P is half formed, the line disappearing into a messy scribble, as if the writer had fallen asleep before they could finish and their pen had gone haywire.

Pushed together into the picture’s frame, he grinning, she frowning, stand the blue-haired man, and Theodora Abe. He has one arm around her shoulders, the other holding the camera, so his long tanned arm appears in the corner of the frame. She seems to be protesting, pushing herself from the photograph. When they stand side by side, it’s impossible to mistake them as anything but twins.

I pick up the picture, and when I do, I reveal, hidden beneath it in the book, a small paragraph on two minor gods: Thanatos and Hypnos.

*Thanatos, translating literally to “death” or “to die” was the personification of peaceful, non-violent death in Ancient Greece, often referred to but very rarely seen in person. In Homer’s The Illiad, Thanatos and Hypnos, the god of sleep, are confirmed as twins, when they are charged by Zeus via Apollo to deliver a dead hero back to his home for a proper burial. The siblings both live in the underworld. Hypnos’ children are the gods of the dream. He was a calm and gentle god who helps humans in need, while Thanatos was feared and hated as the enemy of man.*

Beneath the last line, the same messy handwriting that had been on the photograph has circled *enemy of mankind* and written in the book’s margin: *haha*.

The white-haired woman is not mentioned at all.

I suck in a long, shuddering breath. Everything seems to be falling into place. I know it shouldn't make sense—and I try to think like Arianna would, think of manipulation and coincidence and why on Earth not a single one of the Greek gods is Greek—but suddenly every dream I've ever had makes sense. It feels like stepping into a house for the first time and knowing it's home, like solving a complicated math problem in your head or remembering the word that's been on the tip of your tongue for weeks.

It feels like truth.

I flip to the back of the book and find the index, my fingers scanning over the letters, starting at A. Achelous, Aeolus, Aether, Alastor. I stop before Ap, my hand, now shaking, tracing over his name, underlining it until I'm sure I'll rip through the paper with the force of my fear.

I slam the book closed and reach for my phone, but in my haste, it slips out of my trembling fingers and clatters to the floor. I scoop it up and call Apollo. It rings for an eternity, and then I get his voicemail. I call again and again, but again and again, I'm ignored.

I text: What if no one in the town is dead? What if they're gods?

A minute passes and another, but there's no reply.

I make up my mind in an instant. Scooping up the book and tossing it into my backpack, I race for the front door. Suddenly, in a world full of walking gods, the fight between Apollo and me feels arbitrary, insignificant, pitifully human. What do the crimes of our fathers matter if they were operating under the laws of gods? And if his father was once Zeus, then who was mine?

## The Enemy of my Enemy

“Traitors were considered disrespectful of the gods because by treason against their country they also, as the Athenian orator Lycurgus put it, ‘betray the gods’ and heroes’ temples, statues, sacred precincts, their honors established in the laws, and the sacrifices handed down by our ancestors.”

Jon D. Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*

There’s a thousand things I need to say to Apollo, but none of them sound right in my head. By the time I reach the Skylar mansion, out of breath and—if the empty driveway is any indication—out of luck, I’ve mapped out over a dozen conversations. So as I double over, my face between my knees, I can see Apollo’s glowing expression behind my eyelids: sometimes he’s pissed, sometimes he’s smiling, saying things like, “that’s it, Isaac! You solved it, Isaac!” or else, “I never want to see you again, Isaac.”

But no matter the soundtrack, the vision is always the same: Apollo, standing tall, his eyes shimmering under the light of a blinding yellow sun. In my mind, the sun king looks more like a sun god.

I tiptoe closer to the house, past the nymphs on the driveway and past the Greek columns that hold up the sky-blue house—why had I never noticed them before, never pieced together the clues that were right in front of me? But seven weeks ago when I started this job, I couldn’t have said with certainty what a nymph even was, let alone that my town was filled with reincarnated versions of long-dead deities. And maybe this is insanity—this burning, powerful knowing, this

in-my-gut feeling that I'm right, that this is right, like I've known it all before, known it lifetimes ago but just forgotten. But if I'm mad, it's Apollo I want by my side, picking out the straitjacket.

The front door is ajar. From behind it, brief snippets of conversation—a male voice, and then a female voice, both too quiet to be distinguishable—catch on the wind and drift away. I hover on the front porch, call out, “Hello?” but no one answers. The voices are gone.

I step inside.

The hallway is deserted. The only signs of life come from the painting at the far end of the room, a painting that now makes my head spin: giant Zeus towering above his brothers, Poseidon and Hades, staring down at his children and all the gods of Olympus. Hermes. Dionysus. Artemis.

Apollo.

I feel like dancing. I also feel like throwing up. I want to jump off the roof just to see what will happen. Will Theo, the goddess of death, save me, like she did almost two months ago? I walk closer to the painting, reach out a quivering hand and trace the gray, sickly, deformed shapes of the underworld spirits. The goddess of death, the most hated and feared god of them all, had saved me, kept my brains from spilling over the sidewalk like a cracked egg. Why? My photo albums said I met her before in the hospital, but it's not a day I can remember. Even if I had, what could I—a five-year-old with a broken arm—have done to earn her loyalty?

I notice she isn't pictured here. Only Hades gets to stand guard over the dead.

Is that Theo's job? To bring their spirits to Hades, master of the underworld? To bring him the bodies so that he might watch their souls? Was that what she had met with him about outside the mortuary? The story book had said that Thanatos was a god of peaceful death, had called her hateful and frightening. It had called her a man. But it also said no one had truly seen

her, that she was mentioned but not witnessed. She was a mystery. And she was my personal nightmare.

A nightmare that had saved my life.

The voices are back— half my dad, half Arianna—and they have given up on whispers. They yell in the back of my mind: *it's just a book*. But I have never cared less what my conscience thinks, no matter who it sounds like. Neither my father nor Arianna know what it's like to have fallen that far, know what it's like to be so close to death, so sure that the end has come. Neither of them understand what it's like to be saved by a force you can't understand. And neither of them have had my dreams.

If Apollo was here, he would understand. He'd shake his magic 8-ball, and we'd be back at it with another adventure. I can imagine it perfectly, the ball shining, glimmering: *yes*.

I let myself further into the house, walk past the painting and toward another open door at the end of the hall: Mr. Skylar's office.

"Hello?" I call again. No answer. I fiddle with my phone, but Apollo hasn't called back, hasn't so much as texted. "Anyone home?"

Mr. Skylar's office is as quiet and empty as the rest of the house. The curtains, as white as ever—as if no dust, no stain, no drop of dirt has ever stained them—flap silently as a warm breeze blows in through the open window. His desk is cleaned, just an empty computer screen and a square of yellow and blue post-its. The stuffed eagle on the shelf behind him looks eerier now than ever before, as if the emptiness of the house might cause it to come to life, a possessed spirit that comes out only when there are no witnesses. I eye his razor-sharp talons, thinking that if gods are real and death a woman with red hair, why shouldn't long-dead animals come back to life too?

But the bird stays where it is. Though I'm sure its eyes follow me as I circle around the desk, it does not jump off its perch and scratch out my eyes; it makes no sound as I step closer to its master's bookshelf and notice that Machiavelli's *The Prince* is the only book without a thin layer of dust on its spine. I know little about the book—just that it's Italian and philosophical—but I'm desperate to know what a god reads, what gods care about. I inch forward.

"Mr. Skylar?" My voice echoes around the empty room, off the glass desk, and into the hall. I reach for the book, half expecting Mr. Skylar himself to appear in front of me, to chastise me for going through his personal things.

As always, I am thinking too small.

As I grab hold of the book and try to tug it off the shelf, the room shifts. Silently, Machiavelli falls forward and the shelf splits, the books upon it—titles on aviation and business management—pulling away from another, one half of the shelf moving right, the other to the left, until the crack has turned into an entryway large enough for a person to slip through. Why had I never imagined that Mr. Skylar, who owns private jets and limos and a mansion fit for a king, might also have a secret passage hidden behind his bookshelf?

The space where the shelf had been is warm and stuffy, void of all clean air and signs of life. I step closer, try to tell myself that sensible people without a death wish don't go running into the basements of eccentric millionaires, but even I know I'm kidding myself. Most sensible people don't have death in their corner, and who am I to make life boring for my supernatural fairy deathmother?

When I step inside, a single light bulb above my head flickers on, throwing the room into a harsh orange glow. I don't know what I expect—a nuclear weapon, maybe, or his mystical, godly lightning bolt hung on the wall—but it isn't this: plain stucco walls crowded with filing

cabinets. They are labeled with color coded stickers—one red, one blue, one orange, green, gray, purple, and black—but no words. I tug on the blue handle, but the drawer sticks, locked. The orange is the same.

I'm reaching for the green drawer, thinking maybe the third time is the charm, when suddenly the voices from the doorway appear again, a man and woman bickering; and their footsteps are growing closer. Snippets of conversation float into the room:

"It's too late to get cold feet," says the man.

"I don't have cold feet. I just didn't realize the twins would be going," says the woman.

The voices become so loud, it's as if they're standing right beside me. I had not come to the Skylar's house to be a spy. But as the man, whose voice I now recognize as Milos , barks out, "They're not your children," I'm struck with the sudden certainty that to be found here and now means to be found dead.

I grab hold of the bookshelf doors and pull them together, shutting them to all but the last centimeter and engulfing myself in near darkness. As the footsteps enter the room, I peer through the slit between and see Milos enter, dressed in his normal well-pressed suit and followed by a high-heeled and haughty-looking Heather Skylar.

"Where are your kids anyway?" asks Milos , stepping behind Mr. Skylar's desk and crouching beneath it. A moment later, he rises up, holding a bottle of what appears to be very expensive scotch. That Mr. Skylar had this hidden in his office is, at least, no surprise.

Mrs. Skylar scowls as she accepts a full glass to drink. "They went to their grandmother's last night. They're safe." She takes a very small, very dainty sip, frowns, then downs the rest of the scotch in one gulp. Her pale face flushes pink, and for the briefest of moments, as she stares



down into the empty cup, something flashes through her eyes that isn't anything like her normal scowl: is it fear? regret?

"Well good," says Milos . He holds his own glass close to his chest. As he rattles the contents, creating his own mini tsunami of scotch, he pulls aside the white curtain and stares out the window. "There's no stopping it now. The plane will fall." He sips, stares out the window, and sips some more.

*Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.* I will my heart to calm down, to quiet. I cling to my phone, but I don't dare pull it out. *Thump.* I can barely hear what Milos says next over the sound of the blood in my ears, the ringing in my head.

When the glass is empty, Milos takes a seat in Mr. Skylar's chair and pours himself another. "When this is mine..." He begins, but Mrs. Skylar interrupts him.

"When this is ours." She walks across the room, her sharp heels clattering on the wooden floor, and she snatches the glass from his hands. "We need to keep our heads clear. The press will be asking questions." She pauses, licks her lips, then says, "And the police."

Milos 's eyes follow his glass. They're dark and hungry. Like a wolf, like a predator. How had I not seen it before? "Yes, yes," he says. "Ours. Don't worry. I know what I must be. And you, my dear..." He reaches out, touches her hand, and presses his lips against her knuckles. "You will play the role of the grieving widow beautifully."

"Well I should, shouldn't I? I have been grieving my marriage since the honeymoon ended. I've had plenty of practice." Heather tugs her hand away, sets down both glasses, and walks back to the door. "Get out of that chair. Your presumption only makes you look the fool. You own nothing yet."

“But I will!” Milos jumps to his feet, and like a dam breaking, his face splits into a cruel grimace, an anger even worse than his drunken taunting had been back at Harpy’s Hamburgers. A vein, large and purple, throbs in his forehead as he yells, “It’s my birthright. I may not have the Skylar name, but I was first. I was...”

“Yes, yes, I know. Zachary’s true heir. The oldest. The wisest. Or did you have new adjectives to add today?”

Behind the secret bookshelf, I stand frozen, my stomach in my throat, thick and overwhelming as this new information seeps into my sluggish brain. Milos is Zach’s long lost child, the son of the pregnant woman in the yearbook.

But Mrs. Skylar does not miss a beat. In fact, she suddenly seems taller than ever, her chin up and hands on her hips as she says, snappish, “You will get everything, Milos . You didn’t have to involve the twins.” She waves her hand through the air, careless and as casual as if she’s discussing what snacks to bring to her children’s next robotics competition.

“Of course I did,” snaps Milos . “You think I’d let this enterprise be handed over to those brats? He has given them everything! I will not let them take this too.”

The lump in my throat swells to the size of a grapefruit. Apollo and Arianna are on the plane, are set to fly with their father on the highly-anticipated first launch. Is this the plane that Milos plans to crash? It seems naïve—dangerously hopeful—to suppose it’s not. But it can’t be. They wouldn’t. They can’t seriously be considering murder.

Can they?

“And what about my children?” If Mrs. Skylar is scared, she doesn’t show it. As she stands in the doorway, tall and menacing in her pale pink pantsuit, I think back to the book of stories and the painting in the hall. If her husband is Zeus, does that make Heather Hera?

“They are *your* children,” says Milos . He shoots up from the desk chair and crosses the room, takes Heather’s hand in his own once more. “We will raise them together.” He squeezes her fingers in his own rather large, hairy ones. “I’ll give them what he never could; a father’s attention. A legacy to inherit.”

This time, Heather does not pull away, but she does not look impressed either. Her chin is raised even higher now, her eyes fixed on a spot above Milos ’s head. If I was him, I would have ran rather than be left under her gaze. Any second now, I’m sure, it’ll hone back in on him, and then he’ll be toast for sure.

“They’re your siblings, Milos ,” she says. “And you probably have a thousand more with the way my husband—well, the way that man got around. What makes the twins any different?”

“Half siblings,” he corrects her. “And I don’t care about any of them. I care about you. About your children, and the world we can create together when we control this company, this house. Don’t you see? It just means I’m already connected, already involved. Don’t push me away when we are so close to the finish line.”

Heather turns toward the hall. Through the crack in the bookshelf, it’s difficult to see any more than her retreating ankles. As she says, in a voice of great finality, “We’ll talk about this later,” it is Milos that I see: his stormy eyes, his pouting lower lip, the quivering hands he shoves quickly into his pockets. He nods and follows her out. I listen to their footsteps, hear them grow quieter and quieter, and then the front door slams closed.

##

Apollo’s phone goes straight to voicemail. “Pick up, pick up, pick up!” I’ve never been the praying type—never had anyone to pray to before—but as I sprint headlong for the bus stop, skid to a stop in front of the doors, and clamber inside, I pray to everything in sight. I pray to the

trees, to the earth, to the sky—does that mean I’m praying to Mr. Skylar? To Zeus? I pray to the bus driver, who just might be the human form of a transportation god for all I know. I pray to the cellphone companies, to the telephone lines, to the satellites up in space, bouncing my call from one to the other, and landing me right back here in my own storming sea of frustration: because Apollo will not pick up.

An hour ago, I’d been sure he was avoiding me, but at least the phone had rang then. This new horror—Apollo’s voice saying again and again on a recording that makes my blood run cold: “This is Apollo. Yes, that’s my real name. No affiliation to the space ship. Though that’d be pretty cool. Leave a message after the...”—can only mean one thing: he’s on the plane. He’s silenced his cellphone, put it into airplane mode. But I can’t be too late. I just can’t be.

I check the time on my phone, watch the minutes tick by until the bus stops before a giant orange *Road Closed* sign. Three men stand in the street, directing traffic toward an alternative route.

“This is the last stop,” announces the bus driver.

I don’t need to be told twice. The moment the door opens, I’m off, racing past the traffic-control men, into the crowd gathered behind the signs, through the thousands upon thousands of onlookers and newscasters and everyone gathered to watch Skylar Air make history. I run like this was what I was made to do, like every dream I’ve ever had about flying was just practice to lift my feet up off the ground.

Through the mass of elbows and cameras and people shouting “Where is it? Where is it?” it’s hard to see the launch sight, hard to see anything but the backs of t-shirts, and kids seated on their parents’ shoulders. I squeeze my way through a crowd of elderly men with binoculars, past

a family of five—their kids each with matching toy airplanes that they fly above their heads—, past a group of teenagers in every color of the rainbow.

My father stands at the front of the crowd, past the barrier that security has set up to keep the crowd at bay. As I slip under the ropes, a large man in a gray suit and black sunglasses runs toward me, his extra-large hand clamping down on my chest to push me back.

My father calls out, “No, no, Terry, he’s with me! That’s my son.”

The man lets me go. I wiggle past, feeling like a full-grown German Sheppard is sitting on my chest, knocking all the air out of my lungs.

My father squeezes my shoulder. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” He points before us, at the final creation of Skylar Air, at the plane meant to change the world, at his vision, and mine, and Mr. Skylar’s, and all of the engineers who had worked day in and day out to make it a reality. It’s finally real, finally stationed right in front of us. It’s a breath-taking sight, overwhelmingly large and startlingly white, the Skylar Air logo painted on one side in a brilliant mass of blue paint and cursive letters.

And it’s going to crash the moment it rises into the air.

I try to say: “You can’t let it go up into the air.” But all that comes out of my mouth is a helpless wheeze and something that sounds a lot like: “youcantletigoup.” My father’s eyebrows knit together, and I suck in a deep breath, ball my shaking hands into fists, and say, “You. Have. To. Stop. The. Plane.”

“You’re not doubting me at the finish line, are you?” My dad laughs. I can’t remember anything in the world ever being less funny.

I reach out, squeeze his arm. “It’s going to crash! Mrs. Skylar. Milos . He’s-he’s his son. He wants revenge! He’s going to crash the plane!”

My father's head whips around, and for one wild moment—as he stares at the security guards, and then the plane, and then me again—I think my father believes me. I think he's actually going to stop them.

Then he says, "Keep your voice down, Isaac."

"What? Dad! You have to do something! We have to stop them! They're going to crash it. They-they tampered with it or something."

"No one can get through my security protocols." He speaks plainly, quietly. But there's something else, something more he isn't telling me. I can see it in the way his eye twitches, in how he shoves his hands into his pockets. I have known him all my life—we've been each other's best friends when we had no one else in the world. I know when he's lying.

"They did..." I begin. But I know before I finish my sentence that my father is right. No one can hack through his security systems; no one can get past his firewalls. If Mrs. Skylar and Milos have managed it, there's only one way they could have done it.

"You helped them, didn't you?"

The words feel like a curse on my tongue. I'd rather wash my mouth out with soap a thousand times than to have to say them again, to believe they are true.

My father shifts from one foot to the other. His eyes are on the plane again, and I can read the guilt on his face like some awful script. Is this why he didn't want me around Apollo, not because he was a bad influence, but because all this time, my own father was plotting against his family? The guilt—to see his son with the boy whose father he was planning to kill—must have been too much to bear. Did he know Apollo would be on the plane too?

"It's not going to crash." He speaks in a whisper. "It'll never get off the ground. I've made sure of it."

“What are you talking about?” I’m not sure I ever speak the words out loud. My throat feels like sand paper. There’s a pressure on my tongue that must weigh a thousand pounds.

“Whatever you heard...” My father stops and licks his lips. When he speaks again, it sounds as if every word costs him the world. “The plan was never to crash the plane. It will never get that far. It will never take off. Today, Zachary will understand what it feels like to be humiliated, to see his work taken from him. By morning, he’ll be a joke. The fool who thought he could do the impossible.”

My father—the kind, careful, paranoid man I’ve always known—is gone, replaced by the mad scientists who had possessed him in our kitchen. I can barely hear him over the rush of blood in my ears.

There was never water under the bridge after all. Mr. Skylar had stolen my father’s Minotaur designs, left us penniless, and now he would have to suffer too. A public failure. A plane that could not fly, his promise to change the world proved only a hopeless dream in front of thousands of onlookers and every news crew in California.

It would have been the perfect plan: enlisting the help of the forgotten bastard son and the betrayed wife. An attack on Mr. Skylar’s company, on his reputation. An attack at the heart: physically harmless, but spiritually devastating. For my father was not a murderer, but an engineer, and he could craft deception as well as innovation.

It would have been the perfect plan, if at that moment, the plane didn’t whir to life and begin to drive down the runway.

“It’s going!” I shout.

“It won’t make it into the air,” he says. “Don’t worry. It’ll stop. It’ll stop.”

I have never hated my father before, but I do now. I hate him with every fiber of my being, hate him until it makes my whole body shake. Not even when he was yelling at me in the kitchen did I hate him like I do in this moment, not even when he'd made me leave the Skylar house all those years ago, when he'd torn away the only friend I'd ever had. In a world of mysterious dangers, where every building was a place to fall off, and every stranger was the reaper, my father was my hero. But my world isn't mysterious any more, and the reaper isn't the bad guy.

I pinch my arms, my thigh, the inside of my elbow. Each touch stings, too real to be a dream. My father stares up at the sky, his face pomegranate purple, maybe because he's holding his breath, or maybe because his own mistakes are sucking the life out of him. I don't know. And I don't care.

I hate him.

It's a fire in my veins, burning me up from the inside out. How could he have done this? How could he have betrayed everyone? After all his lectures to me about trusting the right people, how could he have partnered up with murderers?

"Why did you do it?"

"Isaac, you have to understand—"

But I don't hear the rest of my father's words over the echo of a previous fight, an ancient version of my father yelling out the same thing. I've floated back to another time, another world. My father stands before Apollo while a broken boy lays in his arms. *I have to understand nothing*, Apollo had shouted. He'd been a dream then—the punisher and not the victim—but if I didn't do something and do it now, Apollo would become that boy: broken and crumpled, fallen from a mile above.



The fire in my veins turns to ice water, fills my throat until I feel like choking. My words are spit out, as if spoken by another boy, one stronger and braver and so much surer than I: “You have to fix this.”

“There’s nothing to fix,” begins my father. “It will—”

But his words are silenced as, in front of us, the plane reaches the end of the runaway and shoots up into the air to the sound of ten thousand cheers. Change the octave one degree, and they might as well be screams.

## The Minotaur

“So it came to be that, around the time that the father was introduced to the sameness of everyone’s guts, he started framing up his labyrinth.”

Ron Currie Jr., “Labyrinth,” *Xo Orpheus*

There’s a ringing in my head louder than the whirl of the plane’s engine, louder even than the screaming, cheering people behind me, the newscasters making sure the cameramen get the, “perfect shot.” Everyone around me is smiling, but all I see is a battlefield. It’s chaos in every direction. Phones snapping photographs become missiles shooting off their warnings; the laughs become cries; my father’s cursing, under his breath as he rubs his temples and fiddles with something solid in his left pocket, becomes a warning shot echoed over a megaphone.

I wish it was. I wish everyone could hear him, wish the whole world was tuned in and listening as he whispers on repeat: “this wasn’t supposed to happen. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.” Because my father wasn’t supposed to be the villain. And Apollo wasn’t supposed to die in a fiery plane crash just two months after we’d reunited. Children weren’t supposed to be abandoned, weren’t supposed to grow up to kill their fathers, and Milos and Heather weren’t supposed to be the bad guys when the very gods of death roamed just down the street.

But behind us, Mrs. Skylar has arrived. And I know the truth now: my father is no better than she is.

As the crowd quiets down, I hear her tell the news reporters that the children were sick. “Sadly, I had to miss this launch to take care of them,” she says with a twinkling little laugh. The reporters soak up her every word, nod sympathetically. My father and I are the only people in town—perhaps in the whole world—who know the truth, and we’re on the ground, too far away to do anything at all.

I round on my father as he pinches the bridge of his nose. His hands, which have always been so steady, are sweating now, pale in the harsh afternoon sun, and terribly small. “It’s too late,” he whispers.

“It’s right there!” I gesture wildly up at the sky. The plane is airborne, but it isn’t so far away—not yet. I can still read the words on the side as it rises higher and higher into the heavens, but that won’t be true for much longer. “Just stop it! You have to stop it!”

“The Minotaur system. They changed it.” My father’s voice is heavy, quiet, as if every word costs him all the air in his lungs. He’s not talking to me any longer, but fighting a war with his own head, his own conscience. “I can turn it off. If I disable the security. Yes. I can hack the system then. Bring it down safely.”

He pulls something small and metallic out of his pocket, a round circle with a red button no bigger than an average keychain. “This...”

He takes an eternity to finish his sentence, pauses over the word, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip. And all the while, the plane gets farther and farther away.

“Use it!” I shout. What is he waiting for? Every second we waste is a second closer to Apollo’s death. In the history of planes, how many people have survived a total crash? I have memorized all the flight manuals I’ve ever gotten my hands on, but I never researched this. Why

had I never taken the time to read up on plane safety during all those long days at my Skylar internship?

My father is shaking his head. It's so infuriating, so pointless, I want to slap the stupid lost look off his stupid lost face. I want to shake him until he finds the solution, until he stops looking guilty and starts acting sensibly.

"The plane is too far away," he says. "We're out of range." He shows me a little red light on the front of the button. "Until this is green, it won't do anything at all."

There are thousands of people behind us and dozens in front of us: police officers with guns on their belts and badges on their chests, security guards in uniforms, ambulances on the scene, and EMTs chatting idly in the back of their cars, as if they could truly save anyone who fell out of a plane. Would they catch them? Did they provide parachutes? If Apollo leans into the cushions of the plane seat, would they break his fall? And what about Arianna? Did she ever join a club that could prepare her for this? How can we be surrounded by so many people and yet so completely alone? And what will happen to them all if the plane comes back, crashing down on our heads?

A metal barricade stands between the watching crowd and the watching staff. A security guard marches the length of it, checks his phone, and then checks the sky. His face is wide and fleshy, sweat pooling at his neck and darkening the back of his already black uniform. As I hurry toward him, leaving my father waiting behind me, the man turns and greets me with a smile of very crooked, very yellow teeth.

"You have to stop the plane." Maybe I should have waited to speak, waited until I had at least come to a full stop, until I wasn't panting under the weight of my panic and adrenaline and the not-so-metaphorical plane on my shoulders. But I've lost all sense of patience.

The man's eyebrow quirks up, his smile flickering, but never fully leaving. "Well it's too late for that, Son. But don't you worry. After today, I'm sure you can book yourself a ticket on the next flight."

There is nothing I've ever wanted to do less. "They're in danger. You have to stop them. Bring them back down. Call Mr. Skylar!" He must have a satellite phone on him. Don't all rich people?

The security guard checks his walkie-talkie. His eye narrow, two dark brows verging into one. "Don't worry, Son," he says.

I want to shake him too, shout until he understands.

"We're monitoring everything. All is good up above."

"It's not." My father appears by my side, and even with all the hate in my heart, all the anger I've stored up like food for the winter, I breathe a sigh of relief just to hear the words. At least he's willing to act now. At least he's going to stop this before it's too late.

"The Skylar family is in danger," he says. He lifts his security badge and shows the man his clearance number. "I'm Darrell Hagar, head of—"

"Oh, I know who you are," says the man. "Mrs. Skylar has warned me about you. She said you're a real worrier. But don't you fret, Sir. We've got everything under control."

Of course Mrs. Skylar had gotten to him first. What had she said, that my father was crazy, that he'd make up stories? That he was just paranoid?

"You need to listen to me," says my father, taking a step forward. "This is a matter of life and death."

"Sir, you need to step back." The guard raises a warning hand. "Everything is going to be just fine. Let us do our jobs."

“Let me do mine!” snaps my father, but it doesn’t matter. The man’s hand is on his waistband, thick fingers grasping his taser. My father’s clearance allows him in front of the yellow line, but he’s not on the plane for a reason; he is not VIP here, and his part of this enterprise is over. Mrs. Skylar has made sure of all of that.

“Don’t you two worry about it,” says the man. “All is fine up above.”

Fine. Fine. Fine. The word sounds like wind to me now: in one ear and out the other. Nothing has ever been less fine. When I look up into the sky now, I can barely see the plane above us. How long has it been up there? Five minutes? More? And how long will it stay in the air before Mrs. Skylar and Milos bring it crashing back down?

At the end of the launch site, thirty feet or so from the line of security, a row of helicopters stand at the ready: a rescue helicopter amongst them, and at the very end, white and glittering with those same cursive blue letters, is Mr. Skylar’s. I’d had a single lesson on how to fly it and a skilled flyer in the seat beside me, leading the way. But it’s abandoned now, and in my dreams, I might always end up falling, but I’ve always flown first.

As I tug the red button from my father’s grip, I watch his face crumple, watch his eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but it seems to take years for his mouth to open, for my name to spill across his lips. His scream follows me as I run.

“Isaaaaaaac!”

I weave around reporters, past shouting security guards, my tennis shoes barely touching the asphalt as I hurry onward. I glance back only once: my father is yelling after me, screaming his head off—it’s my name on repeat, again and again—but two security guards hold him back while the rest are on my tail. The last time I’d run like this—faster than my body should allow,

run like my life depended on it—I'd been sneaking into the retirement home with Apollo by my side. He hadn't questioned me then; I couldn't let him down now.

I search desperately for somewhere to hide, but unlike in the retirement home, there is no closet to duck into, no hallway through which to escape from the security on my heels. Their voices follow me, travel on the wind, then are lost in the endless sky.

I hear one say: "There doesn't need to be any trouble, Kid. Come back now, and we can forget any of this happened."

But it's too late for that. If I'm caught, I'll be dragged back behind the line, get a stern talking to; but if I don't try at all, the gods of death will get an early offering.

Mr. Skylar's helicopter has no key. Though a thousand things have happened since the day Mr. Skylar took me up in the air, I remember his lesson with vivid clarity; I have played his words over and over in my head every day since, fallen asleep to a mantra of that lesson, remembering the way the controls had felt under my fingertips, how nice it was to rise and not to fall.

I strap myself in, feeling like a baby in a car seat with the fabric straps around my shoulders and waist. Will they save me when I fall? There is no time to check everything I need to—to stare at the many gauges in front of me and assure that the temperature is right, that this flight is safe. Because there is nothing safe about a rescue mission in the sky, about flying when you are destined to fall.

So here goes nothing. Time to change the story.

I introduce the fuel, and the sound ricochets across the empty runaway, a whirring embodiment of an ellipses, the setup to some cosmic joke I don't know the end of. But maybe it's time to start writing the end myself.

In the distance, I hear a man yell, “He’s over there!” but the blades are already whirring above me, and even as the men run closer—the small dots of their bodies getting bigger and bigger outside the window, and I whisper to the controls “come on, come on, please, come on,”—and then the helicopter lifts straight into the air.

Two security guards stand in front of the nose as I shout, “Get out of the way! Please, move!” and pilot down the runaway. I’m picking up speed, and there is no stopping now. At the last moment, the men, screaming at the top of their lungs for me to stop, dart out of the way and hit the pavement on their bellies. I call out apologies behind me, but they’re lost in the wind.

I move forward for what seems like an eternity, going faster and faster and faster. As the runway runs out of way, I push up into the sky and am completely airborne. The ground becomes more and more distant, the crowd blurred. They no longer have faces or even bodies, are nothing but multi-colored dots who grow more obscured by the second.

It’s only once my world becomes blue—blue sky all around me, and blue ocean in the distance—that my cellphone finally rings.

Apollo.

I scramble to pull it out of my pocket, one hand sweating on the controls, while the other presses the answer button without every looking at the caller I.D. I fumble for the speaker and a voice fills the tiny plane; if he wasn’t screaming, I wouldn’t be able to hear a word over the whirring of the propellers.

It is not Apollo. It’s my father.

“Isaac, please. Come back down. Get back down here. You can’t do this!” he yells. Is he crying? I swear I hear a sob in his voice. I stare out the window, searching for the Skylar plane—a white mass amongst the white clouds—but all I see is my father’s worried face, the tears in his



wide eyes the day I'd fallen out of that tree. There had been no safer place in the world than his arms that day. Not the ambulance. Not the hospital. It was not the cast that kept me together, but his hand in mine, his arms around me, promising me I would be okay.

"I have to do this." The sky is the exact shade of blue now as it was in all my dreams. The exact shade of blue I have woken up from right before I die.

"I know what I'm doing." And this time, it isn't a lie. I know—not because I'm an expert flyer (and I'm not; it is by sheer dumb luck that I'm still in the air)—but because I have done this before. Because every time I have laid down to sleep, I have flown this helicopter, I have chased Apollo into the sky. And maybe once upon a time, it was a hot air balloon, and maybe once, it was metallic wings glued to my back with hot wax. Maybe I have lived this moment a thousand lifetimes over, and maybe I will do it again in the next. For I remember this moment in my bones, and my hands know how to fly, even if I do not.

"You don't have to do this," says my father. He's still shouting—shouting to be heard, shouting to be understood—but his voice has lost its edge. He's resigned. And this too, I know with sudden certainty, I have heard before. We have lived this moment—the two of us together in our panic, in our worry, in our hope—again and again and again.

"Please, Isaac."

He says no more. No *please come down, please come back. Please survive. Just please.*

"You have to trust me." I'm not sure what makes me say it. Is this the script? The words come from somewhere deep inside me, somewhere I didn't know existed until now. "They're in trouble. And I have to save them."

I freeze, lick my lips—they've become so dry in this rush of wind. "We can't be scared of everything, Dad." Not anymore.

For one heartbeat, there is no sound—not the helicopter all around me, or the rush of air on every side, or the frantic pounding of my own existence. Then my father says, very quiet in the midst of so many distractions, “Be careful, Isaac. Come back to me this time.”

My dreams always end the same way, with the same tragedy, the same plummet. But this isn’t a dream. For the very first time, I’m the one in control. I can see the plane now, a giant white beast, hard and solid and metallic, jarring against the soft clouds above and below it.

“I will.”

The clouds are getting closer now. I reach for the controls, veering to the right, where the sky is blue and clear, and as I move, the helicopter violently jerking to one side, my phone slides across the seat and falls out of the doorway.

I watch it go, a small metal square spinning wildly through the air, getting smaller and smaller and smaller—and then it’s lost, and I am completely alone.

## Suns Out, Guns Out

“In one leap his life had changed. Instead of groveling in the dark tunnels of the Labyrinth, he was flying, flying free under the wide bright sky in a great drench of sunlight, the first boy in the history of the world to fly.”

Bernard Evslin, *Heroes, Gods, and Monsters of the Greek Myth*

My father’s fail safe is no bigger than a silver dollar, but I hold it tight—tighter than I’d ever held my phone, tighter than I even hold the gears—as I break through the clouds and into a ray of blinding yellow sun. I look at the failsafe light, then at the plane in front of me, then back at the light.

Still red.

The Skylar plane is impossibly large and it only gets bigger the closer I get: monstrous wings and the giant body of a Great White shark. It is at home in the ocean of the sky, swimming smoothly through the endless blue, through the wisps of yellow and orange.

And I have front row seats to watch it drown.

As I draw nearer to the back of the plane, helicopter whirring, the sound deafening, my sweaty hand pointing the failsafe out in front of me—red, red, red—the plane drops suddenly, plummeting straight down a good ten feet before it rights itself. For a moment—long enough for me to suck in a deep breath—all is well.

And then it falls again.

The lump in my throat—volleyball size now—keeps me mute, but my eyes roam, out of my control. I don’t want to look, but I can’t stop myself. I stare at the plane, then at the controls,

then at the ground beneath me. The earth is so very far away. I can see the town—squares of city paired by squares of green—but through the wind in my eyes and the clouds beneath, I can make out nothing more. No houses. No trees. No people. This is the moment, if ever, to be terrified. But the most ill-times, most inappropriate rush is spreading through my chest, filling me with warmth. The world really is beautiful up here. And I'm the pilot. I'm in control.

A history teacher once told me that a night in the Sahara Desert forced him to believe in gods, that when you're that far away from everything—when there is nothing but endless sand all around, and the glittering night sky up above—gods seem possible. Seem necessary. I wasn't sure I believed him then. I'm not sure that I do now. But I know at least one god that I need to reach, a god I hadn't even dared to look up in the story book because I had known him all along. The son of the sky. And now the sky is everywhere. Blue, blue, blue in every direction, broken up only by the glittering of the orange sun.

But the failsafe is still red.

"Hello? Hello!" A voice breaks through the silence—my Saharan moment with the gods brought to an abrupt end. The voice lights up a radio I didn't know was there. Something on the dashboard—something black and square behind the controls—is glowing green (at least something is) and static fills the helicopter: screeching and horrible and endless. Then again, the same rough voice: "Hello!"

I don't reach for the radio. I can't. I don't have enough left in me—call it brain power, call it nerve, call it whatever you like—but I can't hold the radio and the failsafe at the same time, can't give it my focus when the red-shining circle in my palm is the only thing I care about. My fingers tighten around the silver dollar, while my other pushes on the controls, sends the helicopter closer, closer.

But still not close enough.

The radio screams: “This is a United States Air Force armed F-16. You are operating out of authorized air space. You have been intercepted. Please acknowledge or rock your wings.”

In the rearview mirror, two planes appear through the clouds, sleek and smooth and stealthy. I’m being followed. I’m being chased over the ocean, nothing but smooth blue water below; if I’m shot down, the pieces of this helicopter will be lost forever to the deep. This is my first run-in with law enforcement, and they’ve already escalated to military. All I know for certain is that this is so, so much worse than running from retirement security.

But I’ve come up on the side of the plane now, and there’s no stopping here. My hands are steady on the controls. I was made for this moment. I’ve been training all my life—even if it was only in my sleep.

When I was seven, I watched *Mission Impossible* for the first time with my father, oohed and awed as the hero jumped onto a plane and held on for dear life. I’d thought it cool then; now, I know better. Now, I know it’s absolutely nuts. But I guess nuts is what heroes are made of.

“This is your last warning,” says the radio man. I can’t be sure how long he’s been talking, what I’ve missed, the warnings I never heard. “You are not authorized to fly in this location. Return to the ground now, or you will be shot down.”

This is the part where I’m supposed to be frightened. This is the part where the reckless kid realizes the error of his ways. This is the part where I’m supposed to turn back.

The first shot ricochets off the helicopter’s tail.

I swerve just in time, moving downward then to the right as one shot after another come barreling my way. They sound like rain. A hail storm on a tin roof, the winter that my father was out of work and couldn’t fix the leak above the kitchen, when we’d collected rain water in metal

pails and thrown them out into the yard at the end of the day. My father's face is very clear in my mind now—the downward turn of his eyebrows, the wrinkles around his lips, formed by all of his years worrying about me. I'd asked him to take the job with Mr. Skylar. I began us on this journey.

And now I'll end it.

Another shot hits the propellers, and I fall a foot or so, but regain the controls just in time to steady the helicopter, to hover, a hummingbird in midair. But I need to move forward. The coin in my hand glows red, red, red, but the shots have no color, no explosion of yellow and orange, no KAPOW! like in the comics I'd read as a boy. They are an explosion of wind, of sound, they are the beating of my heart. Every steady thump, thump, thump, thump, thump that I know might be my last.

Something hits the side of the plane, and I fall to the side, scrambling to keep my hand gripped tight over the coin and my body held up only by the seatbelt.

I stop hearing the shots then.

There is a silence in the air, a stillness. In front of me, the sky stretches on for eternity, blue and serene, while the Skylar airplane falls nose first toward the earth. I check my hand; the light is not the only thing red now. Blood trickles through my fingers, fills my palm—some unknown cut from some unknown weapon: the edge of the controls, or the seatbelt ridge, or the dashboard. I don't feel the pain. I can't. Not yet.

Bright, brilliant sunlight streams through the helicopter. As I wipe the blood from the coin with the pad of my thumb, as I watch the light flicker—red, red, red—the orange glow lights up my skin and turns my blood to molten gold. In all the old myths, the gods bleed ichor—the golden power that runs through their superhuman veins.

I am no god, but for just a moment—for a fraction of a second—I might have been.

The light turns green.

A shot hits the back of the helicopter with a force like an avalanche, knocking the coin out of my grip. It falls across the seat and lodges under the seatbelt on the passenger side.

Blood pounding in my ears, my pulse—while it lasts—a steady drumbeat, I undo my seatbelt and throw myself across the helicopter. My hand tightens around the little coin, and as I press the button, I spin around to watch the sky, to see the Skylar plane right itself. But I never get the chance.

The shots fill the air around me, and I fall, tumble out the door of the helicopter, and plummet through empty air. The wind is a cool embrace.

The sky above me is aglow with heavenly light, a golden shine so powerful, I have to close my eyes. But before I do—in the second between yellow everywhere and black nothingness—I'm sure I see a bright, blinding flash of red.

## The Wake Up

“know that there are only a handful of gods but a world of mortals. you will not be the first glint of metal to catch the light of the sun, and no matter what you weave into your heart at night, you will not be the last.”

Arlen C., *Unmythologize*

I wake up to the incessant thumping of a heart meter. The rest of the world comes later and slower: the prick of the IV on the back of my hand, the pressure of a heated blanket, the shadow of a figure seated by my bed. His hands are folded under his chin, and though my vision is still foggy, though his head is bowed, long, messy hair obscuring his face, I know my father when I see him.

We had been in this place only once before: me, with tear stained-cheeks, staring down at my fresh cast; him, pale with worry and holding my hand. When I think back on that day, it's not the pain I remember, but him: how he'd stayed by my side, picked the coolest color—green—for my cast, how he'd convinced the nurse to sneak me extra Jell-O. How he'd left work to protect me and never once looked back. But in all my sixteen years, I'd never seen my father like this: vulnerable and open, no idea that I can see him, that he's no longer alone.

He looks very young. The strips of gray in his tangled hair can't possibly explain the trembling of his bottom lip and the glittering of his teary eyes. He appears to me now like a young man trapped in a body that is too old for him, too tired, too much to bear.

I turn away, stare up at the ceiling. I wiggle my toes, my fingers, blink away the sleep in the corners of my eyes. Nothing feels broken. Nothing feels punctured. And unless this hospital



room is a very strange, very surreal version of heaven—and my father my guardian angel—I am not dead.

The light clicks on as the nurse steps inside. “Just have to take his vitals again,” she whispers to my father. Then she turns to the bed and sees me, awake, and staring. Her eyes light up. “Mr. Hagar! Welcome back. You gave us all quite a scare.”

“Did I?” I start to sit up, and the nurse rushes across the room, fixes the bed so it slides up with me, and adjusts the pillows behind my back. She and my father chuckle in unison. I hear them say something about kids always bouncing back, but I barely hear a word.

There’s a bandage on my hand, gauze and tape where I’d slit open the skin in the helicopter. It’s the only proof I have that my adventure with the failsafe wasn’t just another dream. “The plane...”

My father takes my hand in his. His fingers may be shaking, but his alligator-grip clamps down with no hope of escape. I realize, in that faraway, medicated state—where big truths are easy to realize and life seems very simple and very confusing all at once—that he needs this more than I do. He’s not comforting me; my hand, my being awake, is comforting him.

“They’re alright,” he says. “Everyone is alright. They landed safely.” He pauses while a thousand emotions—guilt and worry and exhaustion and so many things I can’t name, am too tired to name—flicker through his cloudy gray eyes. “You did it,” he says. “You did it, Isaac.”

“You’re a miracle boy, that’s for sure. Landed nice and easy in the water. But that was still a big fall you took, and you need your rest and relaxation.” The nurse wraps a circulation cuff around my upper arm and hisses for me to relax. It’s not easy to do. I hold my breath so I don’t jump out of the bed.

“What’s the miracle?” I ask. “How did I get here? What happened to the helicopter? Where’s Apollo?”

“So much for relaxing.” The nurse smiles good naturedly and pats my shoulder. “I’ll leave you two alone, how’s that?”

“Yes, thank you,” says my father, and the nurse turns to go.

As the door slides closed behind her, my questions spill out, one after the other. “Where is everyone? What happened to Milos and Mrs. Skylar? How did the plane come down? Did the failsafe work? How long have I been asleep?”

“Calm down, calm down,” says my father, but he’s laughing now too. It’s as if he’s lit up from the inside out, giddy and suddenly, wonderfully, completely free. “Everything is fine. Really, this time.” He winks, and I know he’s thinking of the security guards too, of how unhelpful they’d been, how naïve. “You’ve been asleep for two days. No one has been quite sure why—you just seemed to need the rest. The failsafe worked. Once you turned off the system, I got an alert on my phone and I was able to fix the coding and send the plane back to the ground. But that’s not what’s important. What’s important is that you were okay. You never should have got in that helicopter, Isaac. You could have died. When the helicopter blew up, I thought—I was sure—”

He doesn’t finish his sentence, and that’s fine by me. I don’t have time to think about miracles. Just answers. “And Milos ?” I ask. “Mrs. Skylar? Were they arrested?”

My father heaves a deep breath, studies his hands then says, “No,” as if that single syllable is the worst word he’s ever spoken. “But you almost were. You were almost much more than arrested.” He folds his shaking hands together. “As far as anyone could see, the plane experienced a bit of turbulence, but otherwise performed perfectly. It landed without issue. We—

that is, they—were very clever. There’s no evidence. No reason at all to think there was foul play. Just a computer error, a plane gone up too soon before the kinks were worked out.”

“Did you tell Mr. Skylar?”

“We...talked,” says my father. By the way his voice hitches, too high and forcefully airy, I hear what he’s really saying: that he told him all he could without incriminating himself in the process. Which means nothing at all.

“You have to tell the truth.” The words are very easy to say, but very difficult to face. Didn’t my father teach me to always tell the truth? Isn’t that what they told me to do in kindergarten? But if my father tells the truth now, he’ll go to jail.

I watch the joy trickle out of his expression, watch the gray tinge of guilt slide back and make itself at home in his eyes. “No one was ever supposed to get hurt,” he says. “You believe me, don’t you?”

The door opens, and Mr. Skylar pokes his head inside. He wears the same cheesy grin he always does. His goatee is just as primed and groomed as ever. There is not a single crease in his pant legs or wrinkles on his spotless white dress shirt. At his elbow stands Apollo, his bottom lip between his teeth, and his hands clasped together, doing the best impression of nervousness I’ve ever seen.

“Mind if we come in?” asks Mr. Skylar. I wonder what he knows, if he’s realized yet that his wife betrayed him, that his employee—his son—plotted his death, and his head of security put his security in jeopardy.

But his face gives nothing away. As my father waves them both inside, as they pull up plastic chairs and gather around my bed, Mr. Skylar smiles, and smiles, and smiles, and Apollo

shrinks a little more every second. His shoulders hunch; his head is down. He looks just like a kicked puppy.

“So your dad told me what happened,” says Mr. Skylar. I look at my father whose face is impassive and plastic, then back at my former boss. If I’m not fired, it’ll be a miracle. I wait for the yelling, the chastising, the *how could you steal my plane, you’ll pay for the damage* speech.

“It seems you saved the day.” Mr. Skylar grins, and I blink. “Fixed the little glitch in the system. We got a real hero here. And I’ve told the authorities the same.”

Apollo smiles at his hands and I become so busy watching him—watching those hands shake, watching his faraway eyes—that I don’t hear another word Mr. Skylar says.

“Well, I’ll leave you two kids to talk, huh? Darrell, let’s talk outside.” Mr. Skylar claps his hands against his thighs, then stands up. He leads my father out the door.

For a long time, neither Apollo nor I say a word. Then he scoots his chair closer and says, “Gods makes sense.”

I want to laugh. I want to cry. I’d almost forgotten the frantic text I’d sent him, the voicemails. Everything before the almost-plane crash feels as if it happened in another life. But Apollo is alive and whole and still his pseudo-detective self. Still a teenager. Still my friend.

“I really didn’t think any of the cats in town were really sphinxes,” he says. “And zombies don’t regenerate. Just decay, you know? And no one’s been sucking blood. It has to be gods.”

As I bury my face in my hands and begin to laugh, Apollo joins in. I’m not sure either of us knows why we’re laughing or what’s so funny—maybe that our fight had been stupid, or because every human problem seems laughable in the face of gods, or because we’d both almost died—but when we run out of breath, there are tears in both of our eyes and smiles on our faces.

“Dad says you saved our lives,” says Apollo. He wipes the corners of his eyes with his thumb. His gaze falls again; he studies the hospital floor. “I saw you out the window, you know?”

“What?”

“Yeah.” He looks up now, finally, and maybe it’s my imagination, but I swear his eyes have gotten brighter, an inhuman glowing gold. Just like a god’s.

“I saw you,” he says. “When you fell. The plane had just hit turbulence. We were seatbelted in, the oxygen masks fell...” He licks his lips, then continues, “When you fell, there was this red light. It went across the whole sky. Lit up everything. And then you just...sort of floated. You weren’t falling anymore. It was like gravity couldn’t touch you. You just floated into the water. The helicopter was exploding, but none of the pieces hit you. It was like you were in a bubble of that light. It was...wild. The light came into the plane too. And when it touched me I felt all...warm. It was like remembering something I’d really really missed, you know? But I don’t know what it is.”

I remember the red glow. I remember the warmth. I remember it not just from the fall, but from lifetimes ago, as if it has always been inside of me just waiting for this moment. As if I have lived it before.

I nod, and Apollo’s handsome face immediately relaxes. “You believe me,” he says. I nod again. “Good.” He grins a little. “But you won’t believe this.”

He reaches for my bandaged hand, and a tingling heat—stronger than the red warmth, stronger than the butterflies in my stomach—pierces through my skin and sends fire through my veins. And then the pain is gone.

“Can I?” he asks, fingering the edge of the bandage. When I nod again, he unwraps it and shows me my skin: untouched, unblemished, not even a scar.

Two months ago, it would have felt impossible; now it just feels amazing.

“It happened when the red light hit, I think,” says Apollo. “Dad hit his cheek on the side of the plane, and when I touched the bruise it just sort of...disappeared.” He smiles sheepishly. “I don’t know how I’m doing it. It just sort of happens.”

But I know. I think I have always known. As our eyes meet—as we smile at one another, lost in this win, in his new powers, in our new mystery—I see everything. I see him standing in a castle, on a battlefield, on a throne. I see him strike down a snake who dared to attack his mother, see him set up the oracle at Delphi—some far away island where prophecies could be told. I see him fighting in wars, see him shooting his arrows, watch his long hair whip around his chiseled face as he races his chariot across the sky, bringing with him the morning sun. Apollo, god of sunlight, of healing, of prophecy. Apollo, my sixteen-year-old best friend, with no idea who he really is.

##

I’m released from the hospital the next day, but still, my father won’t spill the beans on what he and Mr. Skylar discussed out in the hall.

“It was nothing important,” he says, guiding me into the house with one hand on the square of my back, as if I’m liable to fall over at any moment. But I’m not injured. And I’m not buying his lies any longer.

“Just stop.” I glare at him. He glares back. I wait to be told off, sent to my room, told to watch my attitude. To remember I’m the son and he the father. Though my father has never really acted like a father before—never doled out punishments (except let’s face it, my whole life

has been one giant grounding)—I’m not keen to underestimate him again. There’s a lot I don’t know about the man, and all I thought he was and all he’s turned out to be are now completely and thoroughly incompatible.

“Look what happened last time you lied,” I say, and he sighs.

“You’re right,” he says. “Oh, of course you’re right.”

He pulls out a seat at the kitchen table, and I clamber into it, pulling my knees up to my chest just to prove that I can, that all my limbs still work.

My father takes the seat beside me and huffs. “Well, Zach was angry, of course. The plane wasn’t supposed to have any problems, and it had one. Oh, he has no idea how bad the problems were,” he adds, noticing, I’m sure, my raised eyebrows. “But the world saw the plane have, to use his words ‘difficulties’ and that was annoying enough for Zach.”

It seems to take my father’s entire being—heart and soul in concentration—just to swallow down his sigh. Barely keeping his eyes from rolling, he contemplates the ceiling and then me. “He just told me to do better on the next one.”

“The next one?” The watermelon is back in my throat and sinking into my stomach. I had liked flying—felt like I belonged behind the controls of a plane—but I don’t fancy falling again when this all goes wrong in the sequel. “You didn’t tell him what happened?”

“Isaac, how can I?” My father’s fingers come together like the roof of a chapel, and he studies his own fingernails for the longest minute of my life. “You can’t possibly understand until you’re a father with children of your own.” There’s something in his eyes that says he doubts I will be, and I wonder if he knows about Apollo, wonder if it’s my own imagination. “But everything I do, I do for us. Do to keep us safe. Do for this family. I know you’ve been angry with me.”

At this, his hands fall, and he smiles sheepishly across the table. “You and that Apollo boy were thick as thieves even when you were little.” The name comes harshly on his tongue. “He’s a good boy. But I didn’t want you near that family. Not with...well, not with what I knew was going to happen. This plan—”

“Why did you do it?”

“I’m getting to that Isaac, I’m getting to that.”

I wish he’d get on with it a bit faster, but I nod and settle into my seat to watch his ancient face drift a thousand miles away.

“What Zach did to us all those years ago. It nearly destroyed us,” he says. “And Heather Skylar promised me a good piece of the company when she took it over. Which she planned to do, of course.”

He gets up from the table and begins to brew a pot of coffee. With his back to me, he continues. “That looked good for us, Isaac. Can’t you understand that at least? You know how hard it’s been. We needed the money. And I can’t say I wasn’t eager to see Zach embarrassed for once. He certainly enjoyed embarrassing me, I’m sure. But I never wanted you to get caught up in it. And I never wanted those kids hurt. I just wanted you clear of all of it. Out of range for the fallout. I knew you’d come to resent me. I know how much you wanted to fly.”

The coffee pot hums loudly in the tiny kitchen, and for a moment, it is the only sound I hear alongside my own heavy breathing.

I’m the first to break the silence. “Heather and Milos . They still work for him,” I say. “If you don’t tell Mr. Skylar, they’ll just do it again. They were willing to kill everybody. Not just Mr. Skylar. Apollo and Arianna too. And I think they killed Mr. Torres.”



“I don’t know about that, Isaac. But if that truly was—well, if poor Mr. Torres didn’t die of natural causes, then it was Milos who did it. Heather, despite her faults, would not have stooped to that level.” His face is very lined and very ancient and endlessly tired.

I stand up, move in front of him, and grip his elbows in both my hands. But when our eyes meet, nothing happens. I see no pictures, no whirring memories, no other lives. It’s just my father with bags under his eyes that will never go away and tears on his cheeks.

“She was willing to crash the plane,” I remind him. “You have to tell Mr. Skylar. You have to.”

“You’re right,” he says. He rests his forehead against the top of my head, and when he breathes out, it tickles my skin. “Oh, you’re always right. How did I raise such an honest boy?”

I think of my mother—or at least the foggy images of her I have tried to call memories. I can’t picture anything else, not her eyes or her smile, no insightful comments she might have left me with. I was four when she went away, and I don’t miss her now. But I know my father. I know the sleepless nights he spent listening to her sad CDs and searching the house for a letter she never wrote. I have seen my father heartbroken, seen him cry, see him fight to keep our house together. Seen him laugh, and hug me, high-five me across the breakfast table, and teach me how to build the future. And if there’s no long-lost god inside him, then he can’t have killed anyone, and maybe, amongst all the visions, I can still have nightmares of my own too, free of any prophecy.

“I was taught by the best,” I say. I stare up into his weathered face and smile. “From an honest man.”

He laughs, and the tears trickle down his cheeks and into his greying beard.

It is a long time before he speaks again. I imagine the oceans drying up and the mountains crumbling, imagine all the lifetimes that live inside of my friends, the old selves that have been forgotten and the new ones still to be made; imagine that outside this house—where everything is very still and very quiet—time hurries on without us.

My father cups my chin in one very calloused palm. “I did not act like an honest man,” he whispers. “And not the man I want you to grow up to be.”

It’s a strange thought, my parents planning for my future, seeing as only one of them stayed through my present. My father and I have never once had an honest conversation about what I want to be when I grow up. The last time we’d spoken about it, I’d lied and said I wanted to be a teacher, not a pilot, and I’d watched his eyebrows dart up as he read my B and C filled report card.

Still, I can envision it now: my father—years younger, and far less stressed—and a woman whose face I can’t quite see, making cooing sounds over a crib while they debate if I’ll be a firefighter or a librarian. This image—wavering and uncertain—is not like the visions I see when I look a god in the eye: this one, I know, is nothing more than my imagination.

“I guess that rules out me being a lawyer,” I say, but the joke earns me only a fraction of a smile.

With a sharp intake of breath, my father takes a step back and wipes his eyes. He seems to grow a foot taller then and there. “Well,” he says, straightening up until he resembles another man entirely, a mannequin of strength and resolve. “I’ll tell him.”

He looks me in the eye, and for something that had only begun to make sense two days ago, the lack of other worlds and frightening visions—the emptiness—still sends a shock vibrating throughout my entire being.

“We can’t,” he says, “run away forever, now can we?”

His words are aimed at me, but I know they’re really for him. To psych himself up. To prepare for the worst. And I pray that this *is* the worst, that all my father will get is a slap on the wrist and a ‘do better next time.’ That prison isn’t in his future, and murder not in his past. That this is the first time—and the last time—my father will, as he said, pay for his crimes.

##

When the coffee is ready, we take our mugs and traipse into the living room where we sit on the couch and watch *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. And though it isn’t really about gods at all, and though I don’t see anyone I know on the screen, my heart beats a marathon from start to finish. Just as the credits begin to role and my father begins to yawn, the telephone rings.

“After this, maybe it’s time for a nap,” says my father, grinning. He answers with a cheery hello, but his eyes quickly go dark, and his voice is suddenly very tense and very low.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he says. “I’ll be there. I’m on my way right now. Yes, okay, I’ll bring him with me.” He hangs up and tucks the phone into his pocket.

“That was Mr. Skylar,” he says. “He wants to talk.”

## Interview with a Reaper

“Next he instructed his son: ‘Now, Icarus, listen carefully! Keep to the middle way. If you fly too low, the water will clog your wings; if you fly too high, they’ll be scorched by fire. Fly between sea and sun.’”

Ovid, translated by David Raeburn, *Metamorphoses*

My father’s car—“it’ll be yours soon,” he promised the morning I turned sixteen, which feels like a million years ago now—hits every pothole on the way to the Skylar mansion. As we bounce up and down in the worn faux-leather seats, I watch the neighborhood change beyond the dusty window: the buildings get bigger, closer to the earth, spreading out instead of up, and suddenly there are gardens, greenery everywhere, trees that stretch to the sky.

I’ve grown used to this side of town, to the wealth in their windowpanes, the clean air, and the company. I’ve learned to walk these streets without feeling like an outsider, and I am not ready to say goodbye.

My father clears his throat three times but never speaks, and with the lump in my throat growing bigger by the second, I’m grateful for the silence.

We park before the statues of the nymphs, who stare down at us in their icy silence. Mr. Skylar isn’t outside waiting for us this time, doesn’t lead me in with stories of his art deals abroad. We walk up the cobblestone entry alone, and though the stone nymphs have not changed, their eyes fall harder on our backs, fiercer, glaring, as positive as I am that the house is going to eat us whole.

Every step closer to the door is a full-bodied effort, my heavy, frozen shoes dragging along. I remember a passage from the story book that said Zeus often had children with the nymphs, much to the anger of his wife. Teased like this, with the very home she lives in flanked by his infidelity, Mrs. Skylar's rage is at once entirely expected and thoroughly terrifying.

I search the glass house for lights, for figures, but there's no shadow that can tell me who lurks inside: if she's at home, or if her children are—or her step-children.

I tuck my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching out for the hedges. I want to touch the outstretched leaves, press the tips of my fingers against the thorns. I'll bleed red—I'm sure of it—but would Mr. Skylar? Would Apollo? If they watched the ichor drip to the earth, would they realize who they were?

This ancient knowledge follows me with every step, led weights in my sneakers. Even when I imagine telling him, confessing to Apollo all the worlds that live inside him, the words don't come. How can they? I hardly know more than flashes, glimpses of other life times: the rage and determination he once felt on a battlefield, the power of being a heavenly god. When I'd suggested his dad might not be a perfect man, Apollo had raged and protested. How would he react when he found out he was an immortal, that all the comfortable realities of his human life were over? Would he be happy? Would he call me a liar?

As we arrive on the porch, my father presses the bell, and we wait. The sound—an awful, eerie clicking, because of course the Skylars have a custom doorbell, of course a family of gods can't do anything like mortals—vibrates up through the souls of my shoes and into my chest, rattling around my rib cage. Then the door opens, and Mrs. Skylar appears, her short hair perfectly framed around her sharp jaw, her pencil skirt wrinkle free and shockingly, neon green. She leans in the doorway, eyes hardly more than slits as she sizes up my father and then me.

Our eyes meet, and I see it: her life, her many lives, her wrath stretching across millennium, her horrible screaming. A jealousy that is not my own floods my senses until I'm drowning in it, with no room in my head for anything else. Her truth—her deity—is a scream, an embodied betrayal, a series of hurts again and again, the reopening of the same wound through eternity. I stagger under the weight of it—watching her cry alone in a castle in a beautiful gown; watching her whisper to her spies in an elegant cottage.

My father grips my elbow to keep me on my feet.

Then Mr. Skylar appears in the doorway, breaking the visions as he shuffles his wife out of the way. My anger, my envy, disappear with her down the hall as she turns on her heels, snarling under her breath, and slams the door of some far-off room.

I take a deep, shaking breath, but her husband is hardly better company.

We receive no forced smiles, no elegant entrances, no performances. Mr. Skylar—for the first time in my memory—is frowning, his perfect goatee ruffled along with his ever-so-slightly crinkled shirt.

Does he know who he is? Who he really is? Did he look into Apollo's crib the day he was born and see a child aglow with an internal light? Everyone else has a new name but for Apollo, and Mr. Sklyar has always been inclined to bragging. To have a god as a son would be a wonderful accomplishment, but I'd have expected him to take the name for himself too. To claim his deification for all the world to see.

Only, Mr. Skylar doesn't look like a god. Not today. He looks just like a man. And he's a man who has been wronged.

“Come on,” he says. “Isaac, I’ll need to speak to your father alone.” His voice is curt, to the point, but his intentions are clear: I am not the one in trouble today. “The twins are upstairs. Apollo has been dying to see you.”

I look at my father, and he nods just once.

I hurry for the stairs.

##

I’ve hardly made it through the doorway to Apollo’s room when I’m met with a high-pitched squeal I have never heard before in my life and a pair of very strong arms around my neck. Arianna drops back to the floor quickly, but when she kisses my cheek, my face heats up about a million degrees.

“I can’t believe you. I cannot believe you,” she says. She slaps my chest with the back of her hand. “Our little Isaac. A big ol’ hero.”

The word had felt strange enough in Mr. Skylar’s mouth, but on Arianna’s, it just sounds like a joke. When I close my eyes, I can still see the endless sky all around me, but it’s a peaceful thought, not a frightening one, so I don’t feel particularly brave or daring or anything I’m sure heroes are meant to be.

Behind Arianna, Apollo sits on his bed, his face split wide with his patented grin and surrounded by a sort of orange aura. I blink, but if it’s my imagination, the glow sure isn’t ready to give up, glistening on his dark skin as if to make no mistake what he’s the god of.

The word still feels more like a dream than any of my nightmares ever did. If I had thought it was difficult to keep up with Apollo once he’d sprouted a six pack, how am I ever supposed to compete with this new supernatural version?

“She’s been worrying worse than our mom, Man,” Apollo begins, but I lose track of what else he is saying, as his sister chooses that moment to grab me by the shoulders and look me up and down for injury. As she looks me in the eye, saying something about how I look ‘whiter than usual’, the room fades away, replaced instead with a million flashing images.

I watch the moon drift across the sky, watch Arianna duck beneath a star-lit tree, a bow and arrow on her back, watch a dozen young girls follow her through the brush, on a hunt and in chase of a deer. But before the visions can finish, before any name can spring to my lips, Arianna shakes me, and the room comes back into focus: Apollo’s many golden trophies, the dolphin posters, and the bright summer day glittering out the window.

“I can’t believe you stole a helicopter,” Arianna is saying. I don’t know when she walked away, and I can’t remember her letting go. She’s sitting on the bed beside her brother, grabbing a book it seems she’d been reading before I arrived. She shuffles through the pages to find her spot.

“I wish I could have seen those guards faces,” she says. “You’re lucky you’re a white boy. They never saw you coming, huh? If you’d been Black, they’d have shot you down the second you stepped over that line. You never would have even got close.”

I hadn’t thought of that. In the moment, I hadn’t thought of anything but getting the failsafe close enough to work. I have no doubt that Apollo and Arianna would have done the same for me if I’d been on that plane, but could they have? Would the world have let them be the heroes?

With my head still spinning, I take the seat between them on the bed and stare at the place on my hand where there should have been a scar. Instead, there’s nothing but pale, slightly freckled skin.



“He do you too?” asks Arianna.

My face heats. “What?”

“Heal you,” she says. “At this point, I think he wants me to get hurt just so he can heal it. We can’t tell dad, anyway.”

“I don’t want you hurt,” says Apollo. “It’s just a little weird that you were in an almost-plane crash and didn’t get hurt at all.” His thigh is pressed against mine, and his body is a furnace. I glance at his face. Arianna is right; he almost looks disappointed.

“Did anything happen to you when the light hit?” I ask her.

Without looking up from her book, Arianna shakes her head. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“What are you reading?”

She waves the cover in my face. It’s entirely black except for a spiral of white lights and a title that reads: *On Reincarnation*.

“She’s been reading that all day,” says Apollo.

“Well sue me for wanting to learn what’s happening to the adults in this town.” Arianna flips the page with so much force, I’m amazed it doesn’t give her a paper cut.

“You two believe me?” Something is happening in my stomach, something warm and pleasant—like butterflies instead of bombs.

“Of course we do,” says Apollo.

“As if you could come up with a story this good,” says Arianna.

Apollo leans in close and whispers in my ear, “She’s just glad we’re not related to vampires.”

I bite back a laugh, but something inside me—call it guilt, call it fear—begins to squirm. The twins still believe that it's only adults in this town who have long-lost identities, that their lives are their own, that they belong only to the here and now.

If ever I was going to tell them, the moment is now.

It's hard to imagine a world filled with gods, to think that any of my neighbors might once have controlled the seas or the North winds or something, but it'd be harder without Apollo and Arianna by my side. As they begin to bicker—questioning how the world can be functioning if gods are trapped as humans (“I mean, who puts the sun in the sky then?” asks Apollo, and my stomach churns as Arianna snaps, “The Earth rotates around the sun, Dummie. Just because people are immortal now doesn't mean that science suddenly changes.”)—I open and close my mouth a dozen different times.

But I can't do it. I can't tell them that they're gods too, can't take away their humanity and my companionship. I've only just begun to see the flashes, to see a tiny piece, a fraction of the lives they once had, and I don't know what they mean yet. It would be irresponsible to tell them a story I haven't finished reading.

Well, it's as good of a lie as any.

##

My father calls me downstairs five minutes later, and I wave goodbye to the twins.

“We'll get lunch!” Apollo calls after me. “And not next summer.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I'll call you.”

Apollo grins.

Downstairs, my father finishes shaking Mr. Skylar's hand and then clasps my shoulder. "Time to go, Kiddo," he says, and he half smiles, half grimaces back at my old boss. I wave sheepishly, and we march out the door.

"So," I begin, but I had not thought of what to say next. Coughing, my throat suddenly very dry, I push my hands into my pockets and concentrate on the grooves between the cobblestones.

It's a very long walk to the car.

"He's not pressing charges," says my father.

Suddenly, all the oxygen comes rushing back into the world. Birds sing again in the trees. The sun is shining, its warmth whispering against my skin.

"But I've been fired."

It's exactly what I expected and—judging by the resigned grimace on my father's face—what he knew was right, but there's still the same swooping sensation in my stomach that belongs to bad news, like several large stones have been plunked down my gullet one by one. We haven't even fixed the hole in the roof, and my father's out of a job again. We're back at square one. And my scholarship must be as good as gone.

"Heather got there first," he says. "To be expected. All things considered, she was very kind."

My father pulls open the passenger door, and I slide inside. He doesn't continue speaking until he's already behind the wheel and rolling over the engine. "She told him she had nothing to do with it, of course. Said she'd overheard Milos and me talking. Well, that's that. A man's going to trust his wife, and it could have been worse. She could have said I'd planned to hurt them. She didn't blame me for any more than I really did.

“Well, he said he just can’t trust a man like that in his company. And I can’t blame him. He’s more forgiving than he used to be. Ten years ago, he’d have had me in cuffs the second I opened my mouth. But he said he believed me. That I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

If I were Mr. Skylar, I wouldn’t trust my father either. But I’m not ready for the bills to stack up, for the worry to eat my father alive from the inside out.

“You on the other hand...” My father stops at the light and quirks an eyebrow in my direction. “Have been welcomed to stay at your internship as long as you like. Yes,” he says, laughing as my breath catches and my face turns to fire. “I know. I think maybe I’ve always known. Well, when he told me today, I wasn’t very surprised anyhow.”

I try to imagine myself on the bus the next morning, heading off to a place my father is not allowed to go. To sit in the basement, watch the engineers undergo Phase Two. To get more coffee, to sit on the sidelines for another year, another summer, to watch Mr. Skylar change the world through the work of all his nameless, thankless assistants.

“Nah,” I say. “I think I’ll stay home.” I’ll find another job. I’ll have to. But I don’t say this out loud. I don’t want to see the guilty look in my father’s eyes. I don’t want him to worry.

“Milos won’t be so lucky,” he says. My father taps his fingers against the steering wheel—the same tune he always hums at home. In the car, in the quiet, it’s an ominous war song, and it’s only too easy to fill the space with the horrors of my own imagination. I can see a crowded room, a funeral song.

“He deserves it,” I say. “Did you tell Mr. Skylar about Mr. Torres?”

My father sighs. “I did. And maybe Milos did it, but there’s no proof. Regardless, Zach will do everything in his power to put Milos behind bars.”

“His own son?”

“His own son.”

When we stop at a red light, I meet my father’s eyes. There’s a promise reflected back at me that makes it much harder to hold onto my anger than I ever could have predicted. My father has made mistakes—maybe more than I know—but he’d never sell me out. Mr. Skylar forgot about his son, left him behind, and it came back to bite him in the end. But my father has never forgotten about me. And in that moment, I believe him: everything he’s done, he’s done for me. For better or worse, we are in this together.

We don’t speak again, not until the car is pulling into the driveway and my father has turned off the engine. He sits quietly for a full minute, staring at his hands, and I sit quietly, and stare at him. Another minute passes. Two. Then he says, very softly, “Thank you, Isaac. For reminding me who I am.”

##

I take a walk after dinner. My father stands in the doorway, watching me go, his face a Picasso painting of emotions: worry, resignation, hope. These August days are long, but twilight will be upon us soon, and then night, and my father has never let me wander the streets alone at dark before, never trusted me to come home in one piece. But I stand on solid earth, and maybe that’s enough for now, maybe that’s our compromise, our middle ground.

Warm air whips my hair across my forehead like fingers, like a caress I might remember or maybe just imagined. In the far, far recesses of my mind, I hear a woman’s voice telling me it’s time to get a trim as she pushes my bangs back with a mother’s caress. Did that ever happen? How funny it is to live in a world where I’m now more certain that gods exist than my own flesh-and-blood mother.

I tuck my hands into my pockets and hum my father's tune, hum and sing until I can't remember any more words, and the wind grows so loud, I can't hear my own thoughts.

The ocean isn't so pretty on this side of town. There are no white sand beaches, no picnic tables, no happy, picture-ready families in bathing suits. But there is a pier, and as you walk across the splintered, weather-worn wood, past the pelican droppings, and the holes where crustaceans have made homes out of failing infrastructure, you come to a place of absolute silence—or at least a place where the soft lapping of the ocean against the pier legs and the tap-tap-tap of a bird drilling the wood for food, disappear so easily and drown out the sounds of the factories and the people and city behind you so thoroughly, that nothing else, nothing but you, exists.

“I do hope you're not planning on a swim.”

The voice is crystal, tinkling, strong in the way a vase would be strong if it came crashing down on your head. As I turn to face her, Theo folds her arms across her chest and looks at me like a mother at a very disobedient child.

“A helicopter?” she says. “You really do want to make my job difficult, don't you? But you look good. Whole. That's good.”

There goes my heart again, zero to sixty—thump, thump, thump, thump, thump against my ribcage. “I thought your job was death,” I say. “But I'm alive. You keep keeping me alive.”

“Peaceful death,” she says. “And your almost-deaths have never been peaceful.” She drops her hands, hooks her thumbs into her waistband. She's dressed in bellbottom jeans and a flowey, shoulder-less white top—the angel of death at Burning Man. “Who told you?”

“Your brother.”

Theo hisses through her teeth. “Of course he did. Well, that cat's out of the bag.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I can’t tell anyone.” She takes another step closer. So do I. The Earth wobbles beneath us, sways with the waves beneath our feet. “And neither can you.”

“Why not?” I ask.

Theo smiles. “I can’t tell you that either.” She crouches at the edge of the pier and puts out her hand. A white bird, moving unsteadily on one broken wing, drops from the sky and lands perfectly in her palm. It twitches once, and then falls horribly, permanently still.

“You killed it!” I don’t mean to yell, but it comes out that way anyway, harsh and piercing, and so much like Apollo’s ancient curse that I take even myself by surprise.

Theo’s face is impassive, an unreadable stone. She shakes her head. “No,” she says. She tames the bird’s ruffled feathers with the tip of one long finger, and the feathers fall flat, peaceful. “I saved it from a very painful crash.”

“Like you did with me.”

She doesn’t respond. Instead, she drops the bird in the water, and its body sinks, gentle waves rushing over its tiny head to turn its white wings grey. Theo turns around and smiles.

“It was never you, was it?” I ask. “Working against Mr. Skylar?”

“No.”

“Or Mr. Naaji?”

“No.”

“What were you two planning?” I ask. “What were all those pictures? Who’s the white-haired woman?”

“We have business,” says Theo. She stands up and shakes the water from her fingertips. Not a drop has touched her clothes. “All of us. Those pictures were from another time. Another life. Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Will I ever know what’s happening?”

“I’m hopeful.” And she genuinely looks it, her smile wavering and nervous. I can imagine—perhaps in another life—taking her hand and walking into the great beyond. I can imagine the sort of faith it must take to venture into death with nothing and no one but this woman at your side. Maybe it wouldn’t be so hard after all.

“You keep saving me. Thank you.”

Again, she smiles. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Kid. Be careful with heights, won’t you?” She winks and with a turn of her heels, she’s off, walking away across the pier.

I watch her go, her white shirt flowing around her in the wind. A cloud drifts through the sky, revealing a brilliant, blinding white ray of sunshine, and she disappears in the glow. When I blink, she’s gone entirely.

I wait for a sense of surprise, of disappointment, but it never comes. There is no sense, I suppose, in hoping death will walk towards you instead of away.

Shielding my eyes against the last, shimmering rays of the day’s light, I watch the sky turn pink and purple, watch the clouds scrape across it with a painter’s erratic hand: white, and blue, and red, and every color in between. The water traces the pier with a lover’s delicacy. And my own reflection comes swimming up out of the waves, glistening on oil-slicked blue-green: overgrown and dirty brown hair, a mass of freckles, and my own brown brown eyes.

Our gaze—mine and my reflection—meet, and flying to the tip of my tongue comes a name. My name.



Icarus. The boy from the old fairytale, the ancient legend, the cautionary myth. Son of Daedalus, who enraged the gods, who was warned to fly only in the middle of the sky, not too high, not too low. Icarus. The boy who flew too close to the sun.

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